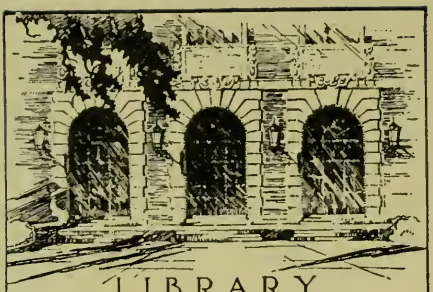
A Mine of Wealth

Esmè Stuart



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A MINE OF WEALTH.

VOL. II.

A MINE OF WEALTH

BY

ESMÉ STUART

AUTHOR OF

'MARRIED TO ORDER,' 'A WOMAN OF FORTY,'
'KESTELL OF GREYSTONE,' ETC.

'We cannot remove the conditions under which our work is to be done, but we can transform them. They are the elements out of which we must build the temples wherein we serve.'

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, LIMITED,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.
1896.

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A MINE OF WEALTH.

CHAPTER I.

A COUNTRY RETREAT.

The rectory at Chapel Stacey is approached by a long drive which winds round a field, then, passing through a strange cutting in a section of solid rock, it turns in rather suddenly close to the entrance. This front door has also a strange peculiarity, for it is shut in by two large, green, wooden, venetian shutters, as if it were an immense window. When the servant an-

swers the bell, these shutters have first to be rolled back by means of some mysterious pulleys from within, before visitors can be ushered into the large, sombre hall. The house wore by no means a cheerful aspect; it was, moreover, painted grey, but this cold colour was a good deal hidden by abundant creepers.

The edge of a lovely wood skirted the drive all the way from the road, and extended southward on the slope of the mountain for at least two miles. For this reason the ground was in parts extremely steep, but the present rector had made many winding paths in the wood, and these paths, maze-like, meandered up and down, sometimes being lost on the top of a knoll, from whence the valley would be seen far below, and at other times they led right out upon the heather and gorse-covered mountain.

Rabbits were plentiful in the rectory wood, and there were besides pheasants to be found, and blackcocks strayed in from the uplands, so that this glebe was a somewhat awkward possession for a country rector. Poachers and parsons never truly respect each other, for one despises law, and the other is shy of using its carnal weapons. The present rector was, however, a firm upholder of his rights. The pheasants and the wood were ecclesiastical possessions, and must be respected. So well was this wood fenced in, and so difficult was it to enter it, save in a legitimate manner, that it was now rarely visited by the poachers. Moreover, there were lodges at each end, and the steepness of the climb on the hill-side was a better deterrent than keepers. To be pursued up the side of a house is unpleasant, especially when, at the top, you are pretty

certain to be caught either by your pursuer or by barbed wire.

Outside the rectory, and close by its back-gate, a romantic road sloped up towards the high ground, winding round several spurs of the hills, till, after some nine or ten miles, it reached the next valley. This road was one of the loneliest imaginable, without human habitation, and with not many defined landmarks.

Chapel Stacey itself, lying still lower than the rectory, was one of the few spots in England which, having every advantage of beauty, pure water, and endless mountain walks on both sides of its pleasant valley, had yet escaped the eye of the contractor. This was partly owing to Lord Stretton who owned one half of the little town, partly to Mr. Gwillian for keeping his few acres intact and refusing to sell, and also to a widow lady who was rather

crazy and objected to sign her name to any paper. Its very few roomy cottages and comfortable villas were filled in the summer time with tourists of the better sort who had become aware of this beautiful spot, but otherwise Chapel Stacey lived its life in enviable loneliness, keeping faithfully its rigid rules of social etiquette which made the caste system as strong, if nameless, as that which rules our Indian possessions.

The scattered county people never visited the middle-class gentry of Chapel Stacey, though there were two exceptions to the rule—the rector, who was himself a county man, and the doctor, who was too necessary to have his antecedents closely enquired into. If you cannot look a gift horse in the mouth, neither can you hunt for the pedigree of your cleverest medical man. You are glad when he possesses a

name such as Seymour or Douglas, which may, as well as not, belong to a good family, and you further take care not to acquaint yourself with the maiden name of his wife, but you declare—if you belong to the county set—that she is ' very presentable.' Thus the doctor and his wife yearly receive an invitation to dinner, given about the end of January when you think no one will drop in, and this once done you feel that you have paid your debt of honour in full.

It was soon known—for nowhere does news travel faster than in the heart of Africa and in rural England—that the rectory had been taken by Mrs. Beddoes, and the county people put their heads together to solve a very grave difficulty. It was ascertained that Mrs. Beddoes had been a Miss Gwillian, but the county people did

not visit Mr. Gwillian, for though he farmed his own land, the family savoured too much of the farmer class. They were poor, made no show, and could not give grand dinner-parties in return. But then Mrs. Beddoes was mother to the well-advertised heiress, and such an heiress is an abnormal production. Her wit, beauty, and elegance had been strangely exaggerated, and alas, among the bluest blood, there were younger sons and even eldest sons who wanted money.

Was the widow to be visited? No state-trial could have been more discussed, and no verdict more desired than the answer to this question, but the difficulty was that no one wished to act as jury, at least no one wished to be foreman to the jury, and to have to announce the verdict. The county had its good side as well as its

selfish side. They said, and said truly, that money was no passport to their circle. The Drapers of Carlee were rolling in money, but 'nobody' visited them. Mrs. and Miss Beddoes had, however, been seen in very good London society, there unfortunately money was a passport, but further it was whispered that Gaythorne Greenwood who visited 'everybody' was an intimate friend of the widow.

So the jury said, 'We must wait and let them settle down a little, and see what Clara Osborne does when she comes home.' Which meant, 'Let's see which county family makes the first move, if it's one which leads society we will follow suit, otherwise we shall still reserve the right of private judgment.'

For all these reasons the heiress found, on first arriving at Chapel Stacey, what she most longed for, quiet seclusion in the

strange old rectory, and solitude in its wonderful wood and among its mountain walks.

It was a beautiful July morning when Sara sprang from her bed and looked out of her bedroom window. She and her mother had arrived late the previous evening, but before leaving London Mrs. Beddoes had told Sara not to inform the Gwillians as to the exact date of their arrival.

'But, mother dear, they will love to come and meet us,' Sara remonstrated.

'There are many painful recollections connected with my life at Chapel Stacey, Sara. I have told you so,' she answered, coldly. 'I should prefer to live there as quietly as possible, and I want you to tell the Gwillians that I shall not go to see them, though of course they can come and see us.'

'Mother! Your own brother! They will be so much hurt.'

'I think my wishes should be sufficient for you, Sara, but I find that you generally prefer to please yourself.'

Sara stood for a moment quite still and motionless before her mother. The colour forsook her face, then rushed back to her cheeks, but she could not speak. That her mother should say this to her who had all her life made an ideal of this lovely woman, and who more than anyone else belonged to her, cut the girl to the heart. She crept away to her room, and cried and cried as if her heart would break.

'What is it, what have I done? Is it because of Percival? But I have obeyed, I have not written, nor have I tried to see him. Oh! is mother, my own mother, turning against me?'

When Sara next went downstairs, her mother was busily engaged in finishing her stole, and appeared not to notice her child's red eyes, so Sara said nothing, but the wound was still deep, though her mother appeared to have forgotten the incident. The view from Sara's window was unfortunately bounded by the steep wood, and she could see nothing but green foliage and patches of heather, but from a side window she caught a glimpse next morning of distant hills, and of the old, grey church tower.

'I must go—home,' she half whispered to herself. 'I will go before breakfast. I shall have time, and I must explain it to uncle. Oh, but how can I?'

She dressed quickly, and ran downstairs to find herself confronted with the green shutters. Lumb was passing by, and she invoked his help.

'One feels like a prisoner here, Lumb. It's worse than in London. I'll ask mother to keep these open.'

'Mistress said last night that they were always to be kept shut, ma'am,' said Lumb quietly.

'Oh!' said Sara, somewhat surprised, and then she bounded away, running all down the drive till she reached the lodge gate. Here an old woman peered out upon her.

'I must find some other exit,' thought Sara, 'it's really dreadful to be spied upon.'

She did not know the rectory grounds well, having only been there very occasionally, but once on the road she ran fast to the old churchyard, and soon found herself in the village street. Ten minutes later she entered the Manor gates. In another moment she was in the dining-

room, for the French windows were open, forming ledges for the drooping roses that seemed to bring in a sweet message of love.

No one was yet down, so Sara sank into an easy-chair and laughed for joy. What had happened to her since her last visit? Oh! so much, so much. She had felt like an imprisoned soul, except when talking to Percival, during those happy and never to be forgotten hours. What was the reason, was it her money? Yes, it must be that; she hated it. Or was it—was it—— She shivered a little.

'What is it that makes mother so cold, so grave? She is angry about Percival, but oh, I wanted to make her happy with my love, and yet, and yet——' Sara's eyes had a strange, new, yearning, wistful look in them, like that seen in the eyes of a dog whose master has kicked it.

'What is it, what is it?' she said again, starting up. 'I thought that I should be quite happy at the rectory, but this new idea of mother's about these dear people makes me hate the place already Oh!'

There was a short bark, a shuffle, and then Caradox pushed his way in. Then in a moment he was barking for joy, and had jumped into Sara's lap. Another instant, and Herringham strode in and stood almost petrified with astonishment.

'Sara! you here, and you never told us!'

'Oh, I wanted to surprise you all! You knew we had taken the rectory.'

'We just knew that.'

He stooped and kissed her, but Sara's face was partly hidden in Caradox's long hair.

Then the rest of the family appeared, and it was as in old days. Sara knew now

what love meant, and for one terrible moment she looked at her Aunt Lil's cheery face and the answer flashed into her mind, 'Mother does not love me, but these do.' The next instant she resolutely put the idea away and laughed as she hugged her aunt again. Virginia looked on, and secretly gazed at Sara's face. She saw she was changed, then she caught Herringham doing the same, and felt ashamed of her thoughts.

'Well, dear, so now you are come, but rather like a thief; you must stay to breakfast. Or will new-laid eggs and fresh cream be too poor fare for your rich highness?'

'Aunt Lil! I've nothing yet except what I get doled out to me. Mother has it all, you know, and oh! I almost wish we hadn't taken the rectory, it's rather a melancholy place, and it increases poor

mother's painful recollections, she says.'

Mr. Gwillian looked up in his slow, silent way.

'Why did she come?'

'Oh, she loves this country, you know, but she says she will not stir out of the grounds, not even to come to see you.'

Sara laughed as she said these words, hoping at the same time that she might be forgiven for repeating the message somewhat differently than she had received it.

'Not come and see us!' exclaimed her aunt. 'What nonsense. Why, she must want to see her old home.'

'But you will come to see us,' said Sara, her heart sinking as she noted her uncle's face.

'A very one-sided arrangement,' said Herringham, coldly; 'and shall you follow suit?'

'Oh, no, of course, this is my home, my second home at least,' Sara kept up bravely.

'I shall certainly not walk up to the rectory if Lucy cannot walk down here,' said Mr. Gwillian, sternly. 'She was always——' He stopped short and gazed absently at Virginia.

'What are you thinking of, papa?'

'You look as if you wanted a change, Virginia. No one leaves you gold-mines. Eh? What if we took our holiday now instead of later? Herringham could stay.'

Sara's heart jumped into her mouth, but her tongue seemed tied, she could not call out as she wished to do, 'Oh, don't, don't go away, don't leave me alone.'

'It's a very good idea,' said Mrs. Gwillian, 'only I don't want to miss the dear child,' and she put her hand on Sara's shoulder.

'I must go back to breakfast,'said Sara, rising. 'Mother will never guess that I have taken a morning walk.'

'You have told us nothing about your balls and parties,' said Virginia.

'Oh, they were rather fun, only I wanted you, dear.'

'And your strange guardian!'

'Oh, my dear Guardian, I saw him off two days ago. He was recalled by business, otherwise I was hoping he would come here. He is the most delightful—'

'You'll be late for your breakfast, Sara,' interrupted Mr. Gwillian, and Herringham rose to accompany his cousin.

When they had walked some time in silence, Sara looked up through her tears.

'Oh, Herringham, your father and mother are hurt with us.'

'With your mother, not with you, Sara.'

'It will break my heart. Just when I wanted some comfort too.'

Sara had made up her mind to say nothing about Percival, but this seemed to be the last straw which was to break her spirits.

'I shall stay here,' said Herringham, decidedly, 'but of course I shall not come to the rectory. You see, for years your mother has refused to come here, because she said that she could not bear to revisit her old haunts, and now she comes to live close by, and says the same.'

'I don't understand it,' said Sara, in a low voice. 'I wish I could. She has been very unhappy. Uncle must know all about it.'

'My father never speaks of old days. You know, on some subjects he is like the grave, but I saw that he was deeply hurt this morning.'

'And he has always been so good to me, oh, so good!'

Sara's tears still fell silently. She seemed to be so strangely surrounded with mysterious and adverse circumstances, against which she could do nothing, and which she could not even understand.

All too soon they reached the rectory lodge.

'Come in, do come in. Mother said that she would like to see you all. She is very sensitive, and I feel sure it is that she cannot bear to cross the old threshold. Herringham, make it straight with uncle; please do.'

Herringham shrugged his shoulders.

'Why, I thought this lodge was empty,' he remarked, as a crabbed old woman peered out at him.

'Then this must be some one mother knew in London. I thought I heard her

say something about a pensioner for the lodge.'

'I don't admire the look of her pensioner. Well, good-bye, Sara. Come again soon.'

'Don't let them go away, please don't,' pleaded Sara, and Herringham then noticed the altered expression of his cousin's face.

When he got home, he found there was no possibility of calming the storm. Mr. Gwillian was a man of few words, but of strong feeling.

'Lucy is behaving in an extraordinary manner,' he said. 'I will have nothing to do with her, nothing. I shall never cross her threshold, and I forbid any of you to do so.'

'But think of Sara,' pleaded Mrs. Gwillian, now quite recovered; 'her mother has never cared for her, I'm sure.'

'I do not wish to separate child and parent, but I have decided. We will start in two days. As well now as later. I wash my hands of her.'

Then he retired, and his family knew that there was nothing more to be said on the subject. On such occasions his will was law.

CHAPTER II.

A MUSICAL LESSON.

Fearing she was late, Sara hurried along the drive and through the cutting, so that when she reached the first door she was quite out of breath. The sliding shutters were closed.

'Horrid things,' thought Sara, 'it makes the place look like, like—a prison; at all events, one feels like a prisoner.'

She had to ring the bell, so that when she entered the dining-room there was no hiding from her mother that she had taken a morning walk.

'But why should I want to hide it?' she thought, raising her head and walking in boldly. 'Why should mother mind?'

'You are a little late, Sara. I have had prayers, and the breakfast is just coming in.'

Sara went up to her mother, and as usual stooped down to kiss her; but this morning she was conscious of a slight effort in the doing of it, and then she hated herself for so feeling.

'I am so sorry to be late, mother dear. I got up early, and went to see Uncle Gwillian. They are early birds, you know, at the Manor.'

'Were they surprised to see you?'

'Indeed they were. Herringham would have met us if he had known the time of our coming; and, isn't it tiresome? uncle is just going away with Aunt Lil and Virginia.'

'Does Herringham go too?'

'No, not Herringham. Some one must stay. Generally it is uncle himself who can't be persuaded to go, but——'

Mrs. Beddoes slowly lifted her eyes to Sara's face, and Sara felt herself blushing violently.

'You did not know that they were going away? You did not mention it.'

'No, I have only just heard it. Mother, I think uncle was a little hurt about your not going to—to your old home.'

'Did he say so?'

'No—I forget—but I'm sure he was hurt.'

Mrs. Beddoes looked down on her plate, and her face was immovable.

'Your uncle cannot understand any feeling connected with sentiment. I said I would never enter that house again till——' she stopped short.

'Till you were happy; and you are happier now, aren't you?'

Sara said this in a soft, winning tone; she was trying to strike a chord that she began to feel did, perhaps, not exist.

'At my age, Sara, happiness is a relative feeling. A young girl can blot out any sorrow, but a woman who has known long years of loneliness is incapable of expressing in words either her joy or her sorrow.'

'I don't think joy can be quite hidden either. I am sure, mother, that you are happier now than you were at Willington.'

Mrs. Beddoes looked up quickly, but Sara's transparent face revealed no hidden meaning in her words. The widow changed the conversation.

'It will be a pity for you to waste all your time here where we shall live very

quietly, Sara. I have arranged with Mr. Sutton, the organist of Walesbury Minster, to come twice a week and give you music-lessons. He is quite renowned as a teacher. He will come at eleven o'clock to-day, that is his most convenient train, and then you can practise till one o'clock every day. I want you to be regular. In the afternoon we shall drive out. I shall like seeing the old neighbourhood. I am afraid you will find the evenings rather dull if the Gwillians are going away. Perhaps Herringham will look in sometimes.'

'How very good of you to have thought all this out for me! You know that I shall love to have music-lessons. It is delightful. But why did you ask him on our first day? I have not even unpacked my music.'

'Harriet will do that for you. By the way, you like Lumb, I think?'

'Oh, yes, though he is a queer man. He is Guardian's choice.'

'Oh, that does not influence me; but certainly he is a first-rate servant, though I can't say I like a man who so seldom speaks. He tells me that he wants to bring his wife here.'

'Why not give him the other cottage? I see you have found some one for the entrance lodge. You never told me.'

'It was hardly necessary. Mrs. George is the mother of Harriet, my new maid. She has seen better days, and Harriet begged me to house her.'

'I don't like her face.'

'You are very easily influenced by faces. I shall be busy all the morning, so I shall tell Lumb to say "not at home" to anyone. Don't forget eleven o'clock.'

A little later, Sara was going round the

house in order to learn its geography. The central hall was a gloomy place, sunk a few steps below the level of the front door. The drawing-room and dining-room were on opposite sides. Then near to a small garden door there was a pretty study full of curiosities and foreign books, including a few French novels, and again opposite to that was a large room called the library. The staircase, starting from one side of the hall, formed a square on the first landing, so that those above could look down upon anyone coming in or going out of the front door, but the bedrooms were disposed on each side of the hall in two wings, which helped to form a large courtyard behind. Most of the rooms, therefore, looked into the courtyard on one side, and across the beautiful valley on the other. A few, like Sara's room, had only the view of the wood. It

was a very large house for a country rectory, but it belonged to the good old times when rectors followed the hounds, filled their houses with guests, drank their old port with the neighbouring squire, and performed other feats which no one then thought derogatory to their office.

Having gone round the house, Sara re-entered her own room, out of which again opened a prettily furnished sitting-room, which her mother had set apart for her. There was a piano in it, a small writing-table, pretty water-colours on the walls, and well-filled bookcases. As Sara stood by the window, however, she felt no joy at all these pleasant things. The morning visit to her relations had destroyed some of the illusion of life. They were angry with her mother, perhaps too with her, thinking she might have better used her influence.

'They don't know, they don't understand,' she thought, 'that I have no influence with mother. I see it now. We have lived too long apart. I thought I was going to make life so happy for her, and yet—yet—— Oh, what is it?—what is it? It has partly to do with Percival, but not altogether. I don't know if—if—she ever loved me. No, that can't be true. It is my own stupidity. I am her only child. Oh, she *does* love me. She has managed everything for me, and this sitting-room, it is the prettiest room in the whole house. She ought to have taken it herself, but she has given it to me. The drawing-room is gloomy. Oh, yes, it's all my own horrid stupidity.'

Thus, in a fever of new anxiety, Sara argued with herself, hardly knowing what she feared or why she had a nameless dread of an undefinable 'something' to

which she could give no name. She realized that she was, in some strange way, alone and very lonely. She had looked forward to coming to Chapel Stacey, feeling that there she would be close to people who loved her with the strong, simple affection of relations, and she determined to open out her heart to them about her own troubles. Now, through the power of one sentence spoken by her mother, all this was changed. Why would she not go to her old home? It must be because of her deep sensibility; but then, as Mr. Gwillian had remarked, why had she come to the neighbourhood at all?

Sara's light-hearted nature was becoming clouded. The look of perfect, fearless joy was fast disappearing, otherwise she would not have stayed half-an-hour looking out of the window without taking note of the scenery.

Suddenly she remembered her music-lesson, and gave herself a little mental shake. Then she noticed that the sitting-room window commanded a view all down the drive, so that one could see anyone or anything approaching the house. 'At all events,' she thought, 'this is more cheerful than my bed-room window. But I don't want anyone to come here, I want the time to go as quickly as possible till I am of age, and then—then I shall write to Percival, and no one shall part us. It is only silly people who let themselves be parted without good reasons. Percival, Percival!' She leant her head against the shutter, and smiled as she thought of that very short dream of happiness. She had no token, nothing to look at, only the remembrance, at this moment painfully vivid, of Percival's kind, manly face, and of that strange, perfect understanding between them which

had come as if by the touch of a magic wand. Then she had been very light-hearted, very thoughtless, and she had made no provision out of her store of happiness for these dark, lonely days.

Again she tried to rouse herself. What a fool she was to have no more courage than this, what did she complain of? Instead of poverty, wealth surrounded her. She had a good house, the gentlest of mothers, and now she was living in a lovely neighbourhood. Only a few months of loneliness were her portion before enjoying a long life of happiness with the one man she could love.

Then she laughed, the merry laugh of a short while back, but the sound fell flat in the silent room, and for fear of realizing the reason of this failure Sara eagerly began unpacking her music.

Suddenly her mother's new lady's-maid entered the room.

'Mistress said I was to help you,' said Harriet.

Sara looking up quickly now noticed Harriet's likeness to the old woman at the lodge, and immediately took a dislike to her.

'I prefer unpacking my own things, thank you, Harriet. I've always been used to do it.'

'All the ladies I've lived with, miss, never thought of unpacking their own things,' said Harriet, severely. 'If I have to keep your things in order, I prefer doing it.'

It must be owned that Sara was by nature not given to tidiness. Her joyous, impatient nature showed itself in an occasional rummage of her private property,

a habit her mother had already remarked upon in these words:

'Didn't your Aunt Gwillian expect you to be tidy, Sara? I thought I had cured you when you were a little child.'

At this moment the reproof seemed to sound again in Sara's ears, and she yielded the position.

'Bring my music in the next room then,' she said, sweeping out of the room with as much dignity as she could summon up for the occasion.

'Horrid woman! I wish we had kept Sally. She let me do as I liked. I shall tell Percival that I shall choose a nice, meek, obedient creature for a lady's-maid if I must have one. No, it's all very well to be rich but, but—there are tremendous penalties to pay,' and so thinking she sat down and played a sad little piece of Schubert.

It was the birth of her woman's soul, her girl-soul was like the morning dew, and had taken its departure unnoticed by any save by Sara herself.

At this moment her mother turned the door handle. Sara started up as if she were guilty of some fault. She hated herself for this new fear.

'There you are, dear. Mr. Sutton has just arrived—Mr. Sutton, here is my daughter. She has a very good touch, and, I think, the making of a first-rate musician, if she will work. I hope you will inspire her and make her play steadily every morning.'

Mr. Sutton was a white-haired man, small, ugly, wearing enormous spectacles, but full of musical enthusiasm. He was famous as a teacher, and Sara's pleasant smile put him into a good temper; for occasionally he was apt to lose that precious

possession, and in consequence to throw over a careless pupil.

'I'm sure we shall be very good friends. Miss Beddoes has a divine gift at the end of her fingers. Some of my pupils have only fingers like ninepins, all wood and no stability.'

Lucy Beddoes laughed softly.

'I should not have dared to summon you had she been such a pupil.'

'A daughter of yours, Mrs. Beddoes, could not be a ninepin,' said the organist, again glancing at the mother and wondering whether she too had a divine touch, for her face and her fingers betokened it.

Mrs. Beddoes rewarded the compliment with a quiet, dignified smile, then she left the room. Outside the door she paused one moment to listen, though there was nothing to be heard except Mr. Sutton's eager voice.

'Ah, yes, I see you like good music. First-rate, play this Schubert again.'

'That is perfect,' thought Mrs. Beddoes, then she went to her room and spent some time in dressing herself to go out.

Half an hour later, Lucy Beddoes reached the small gate in the wood which opened out upon the mountain side. Her face was flushed, for she had walked rather quickly. She was dressed in exquisite taste. Her black hat, shaded by feathers, exactly suited her special cast of beauty, and perfectly balanced the small head set on the slender neck. Her lips remained pressed together till suddenly a few moments later she heard a rustle among last year's withered leaves, and the next moment Lord Stretton stood close beside the gate. There was quite a youthful look on his handsome face, and with a winning smile he silently greeted the expectant Lucy.

He took a key from his pocket, and hastily let himself in.

'My darling, is all safe?' he said, half laughing, though evidently anxious to escape notice.

Lucy herself saw that the gate was again safely fastened before she answered:

'Yes, perfectly, I have seen to it. The lodge people have strict orders to let in no one, but it is the rector's rule so that is nothing new. Sara is with a music-master.'

He drew her hand into his arm, and they plunged into the thickest part of the wood. At the end of their path was a little knoll surmounted by a pretty summer-house. The morning sun was playing at hide-and-seek over the rustic seat, the birds were carolling their loudest, a soft breeze from the mountain, barely penetrating through the protecting leaves, just wafted the

honeysuckle blossoms within the entrance of the summer-house.

'At last I have you to myself and—and—' Lord Stretton paused. He was as diffident as a young man, and nearly as shy of his great affection. On his way here he had ventured to question himself whether he was wise, whether the penalty he must pay—and he was honest enough to see that he should have to pay a heavy price—were worth the possession of any woman, even one with all Lucy's great personal charms. But one sight of Lucy's face changed all this. The rack would not *now* have made him claim the ownership of his meditation. All he saw was his old love, Lucy, sitting just within the shelter of the summer-house. A spray of honeysuckle nestled among her black feathers, whilst below the hat he caught sight of her oval face, with its exquisite

complexion varying according to his earnest words. Lucy's eyes were bent down as she said,

'It seems almost impossible, doesn't it?'

'Almost! *Quite* impossible to me. To think you, darling, are here, close to me, that you have promised to be mine some day—even if we have to wait—mine entirely, and that I shall be able to spend my life in making you happy. No, I can't yet believe it. And do you know, my Lucy, that I have had a long walk over the hills to avoid coming through Chapel Stacey?'

'Yes, I knew you could manage somehow. I felt sure you would come.'

'I rode to Sudwick, and then I walked across the hill. The property there wants looking after, and that makes a good excuse. I shall walk back the same way,

and pick up my horse at the inn. What do you say to my prudence?'

Lucy said nothing, but she looked up and gave him a smile—a smile which intoxicated him as he imprisoned her two hands in his. All the while, however, there was a modest reserve about her manner which was the more fascinating in that there was no strange eye to witness it. It was for him alone.

'Lucy, Lucy, tell me you forgive the past; tell me, my sweetest! It's only now that I seem to be alive. Do you remember our first stolen interview?'

He might recall it now with a smile, but to Lucy, for years, it had been her most bitter memory, and she could not now regild the past.

'Yes,' she said, looking down again, 'I remember it.'

He drew her fair head towards him, gently pushing back the hat.

'And so you remember when I first made you own that you were not quite indifferent to me? Oh, we thought life was going to let us have it all our own way, didn't we?'

'You thought so?'

'Yes, indeed. I never imagined——but we needn't talk of that, Lucy, my darling. I need not tell you that a man of my age isn't any less able to give a woman his whole heart than is a mere stripling. "As water unto wine." My love now can conquer all obstacles, and when I was young——'

'Obstacles!' she said, lifting her eyes quickly. 'I thought we had none to get over?'

'Well, of course, under the circumstances, there must be a few. But love

can make short work of them. You and I are no longer foolish children who expect impossible things. You know that the property was formerly very much encumbered—and that was the reason——'

'Yes, I know,' she said, with the slightest tone of impatience.

'Well, Lady Stretton's money cleared it of all the mortgages, and then, of course, she thought of her children. Her will was —but it was not for me to interfere.'

'Her will? Haven't you the money for life?'

'Yes, of course, till—or unless I marry again, then it is to be divided. You see, it will leave me a good deal crippled between Percival and Clara—but, as I was saying, the property has been cleared of mortgages, and now, though there are some farms unlet yet, on the whole we shall rub along very well. We shall not

be rolling in wealth, but you won't mind that? Or it might be wiser even to wait till my cousin dies; she is sure to leave me her property—a snug little place in Hampshire.'

'Why do you say that I shall not mind?'

'Because, darling, I know how wonderfully you have managed on a very small income, and how you will be able to help me in every way imaginable. For all these reasons—and others, of course—we must keep our engagement quite private till the deed can be accomplished. I don't want to set the lawyers buzzing a minute before they need; and, indeed, if Percival is bent on marrying Sara at the beginning of the year, when we can't prevent them—we *must* wait a little.'

All this time Lucy's face had been becoming more and more pink. This was

the first time she had heard all these details and the idea of waiting. Indeed, there had been no opportunity to enlighten her, or rather Lord Stretton had not chosen to write all this to her. Now she felt a little taken in, for Lucy had nursed a vision which did not at all coincide with being still a poor man's wife, or of waiting a long time before becoming Lady Stretton.

'Am I to understand that when you marry you lose all your—your wife's money?'

The words almost stuck in her throat, but she said them.

'Yes, dear. It's fair, of course, from her point of view. Do you know, in her —when she was most excited, she used to taunt me with still loving you.'

Lucy hid a little smile of triumph by stooping to pick a daisy.

'What did you say?'

'I never told a lie—I was silent. But I want to talk of you, my own. Look at me, I want to see right down into your beautiful eyes. Oh, Lucy, to think I have won you at last, at last! I am willing to wait, because even that fact seems impossible to realize; it is so sweet, so very sweet.'

It pleased Lord Stretton at this moment to believe in many fallacies. They served his purpose and fired his imagination; he even forgot that the conquest of Lucy had been brought about on his side, at all events, by pure accident.

'Your son will have—I mean that when we are married he will not then be dependent upon you?'

'No—but for that matter neither will Clara, only I would not for the world drive them away from my home. As long as I live, my children can live with me.'

Lucy gently released herself, and, as if by accident, she stood up for a moment. She looked very lovely with her hat off and her hair a little tumbled. A wild rose above her seemed to crown her with its pink petals and its woodland fragrance.

'Lucy, you are lovely like that. I wish I could have your portrait taken at this moment. You are a perfect picture. This wood makes really a charming retreat.'

'Yes, it is perfect. Come, Douglas, let us walk on a little. I wanted to tell you that my brother is going away, and that he takes his family with him, all except Herringham. It will be safer for us. We could never have been sure of privacy here if they had been liable to come in at any moment.'

'Does he guess?'

'Oh, no, no, why should he? He was very angry with both of us at the time,

perhaps most with me. He sided with my father. I have never forgiven him.'

'Don't say that, sweetest; what does it matter what people once thought? No one can blame us now, no one, if we are careful and wait a few months, even a few years.'

Lucy made a little impatient movement with her shoulder, but Lord Stretton did not see it, and they walked on and on in that half silence which is intensely delicious to most lovers. At last Lucy heaved a little sigh.

'It is time for you to go, Douglas. When will you come again? You must write every day, and if, by chance, one or other of us is hindered, we can slip a note into the old thatch of the summer-house. I'll put a little box there for that purpose.'

'To-morrow, dearest, I shall not be able to come. My steward wants me all day,

but the day after you shall see me. Shall you be dull till then?'

'Oh, no, no. I have so much to do, so much to think of.'

They parted at the gate, and, as Lord Stretton lifted Lucy's sweet face to his, he whispered,

'Lucy darling, say "I love you."'

'Hush!' answered Lucy, 'hush! some one may be up on the hill.'

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CHAPTER III.

MR. GWILLIAN'S RECOLLECTIONS.

Lucy Beddoes walked very slowly back to the rectory, her head bent down, her mind full of strange confused thoughts, the uppermost being this new startling fact which had come upon her like a thunderbolt. When she became Lady Stretton, which she had fancied would be as soon as public opinion would allow her, she now found that she would be a poor man's wife. Lord Stretton was in love, and he was of a hopeful disposition, but Lucy knew well enough that it was his

wife's money which had made him a man sufficiently wealthy to take his proper position in the county. To sink down into being the second wife of an impoverished peer, with barely enough income to keep up a semblance of state, was in no way to realize her mental picture. It was even probable that she was richer now, enjoying as she did a very handsome allowance as Sara's guardian, than she would be as Lady Stretton. She had before now refused to marry rich men—James Colborne himself possessed a very good fortune,—but her motive had not been merely to end her days in poverty even with a title attached to it. Lucy's ambition had passed the stage of love in a cottage or even love in a dilapidated mansion, that belonged to the time when she had first loved Douglas Osborne. Now she loved, it is true, but her love did

not exclude a desire for wealth and position. Her thoughts, however, could at present lead to no definite conclusion, so she carefully removed all signs of untidiness, and, as she stepped out of the wood into the garden, she deferred decisions till another time. Of only one thing she was certain, Percival must not marry. She had previously wished to stop his marrying Sara, now she determined that he must marry no one; but how was this to be accomplished?

'Sara!' she called, 'Sara!' for she heard the sounds of music.

Sara looked out of her window, and gazed upon the fair picture below, a picture to which she gave the name of 'mother.' Some of the black thoughts of the morning had been dispersed by the charms of music, so snatching up a hat she ran downstairs and joined her mother.

'Oh, that horrid front-door shutter, mother! Do let us never shut it. It is the strangest, most prison-like thing in the world.'

'I rather like the privacy it gives to the house. No one can open the front door and walk in. I want to live quite a retired life here.'

'It ensures privacy, certainly; but why should the little side door be locked?'

'There was a robbery here last year, so ever since then the rector has kept that door locked.'

'What a beautiful day, isn't it, mother? The hills are lovely! I feel as if I must go out and have a long walk.'

'This afternoon I have ordered the carriage, so that we can drive out.'

'As you like, of course. Mother, don't you think you could just drive to the Manor House and see Uncle Gwillian?

If you just went once it would be all right.'

'He can come here, Sara. I could not re-visit old haunts. It is too painful, and I would rather you did not mention it again.'

Sara was silent. She began picking a bunch of flowers. Again she felt chilled, and a strange dread came over her of the long *tête-à-tête* drive with her mother. She wished to run off to the Manor, and to see them all again. But, if she went, she was half-afraid of being questioned by them.

'So you liked your music-lesson?' said her mother presently, speaking, as Sara fancied, very absently.

'Immensely. I mean to work very hard. I shall practise three hours a day, if I can. With hard work, Mr. Sutton promises me some degree of success. He

says I have nothing to undo, and that is a great admission from a new teacher, isn't it?'

'Indeed it is. You must work hard. It will make the place less dull for you.'

'Dull? One can't be very, very dull in such a beautiful country, but of course—' she paused. She was too proud to mention Percival.

'I was going to say less dull till Mr. Greenwood comes.'

It was Sara's turn to look reproachful.

'Why must he come, mother? I don't want him.'

'I invited him.'

Lucy pressed her lips together a little, and Sara dreaded that silent protest of displeasure.

'Of course; but, but—he won't—think that——'

The luncheon-bell rang, and Mrs. Bed-

does acted as if she had not heard Sara's words, and Sara herself, feeling hot and ashamed, tried to forget them.

The carriage came round, and Mrs. Beddoes gave her orders to the coachman. As for Sara she leant back, not caring where they went, when she realized that the Manor was out of the question.

'Mother won't go near them, I can see that. Nothing moves her when she once says a thing.'

Thus thought Sara, heaving a little weary sigh, and then she lost herself in a dream of her own, seeing nothing of the beauty of the country. Her mother, on the contrary, gazed eagerly at each hedge, each field, each new vista of the high hills which filled up the other side of the valley, and the peeps of the upland coombs which lay between them. On and on they went, till the slopes of the eastern hill had been

almost reached, then the carriage turned into a side road, and all at once Sara noticed a beautiful, old Elizabethan mansion, surrounded by a picturesque park. Waking up from her dream, she exclaimed,

'How very pretty! what a lovely old house! Look at those two picturesque towers! Actually, I have never seen it before; why, of course, it must be Stacey Hall.'

Sara blushed a deep pink as she said the words, and then she hated herself for the meaning her mother must attach to the blush.

'Yes, that is Lord Stretton's house; it is a very fine old place.'

Sara remembered that Percival had told her at the ball that he hoped she would some day come and see Stacey Hall, giving her, after the manner of young men who are in love with a lady unknown to their

families, a liberal if an unauthorized invitation.

Sara was quite awake now. She looked earnestly at Stacey Hall, as long as she could see the house, but when a turn of the road hid it, she remarked,

'It looks as if it were inhabited. I saw all the windows open, and——'

'I heard that Lord Stretton had returned home,' said Lucy, coldly.

And then Sara fell into another deep reverie, wondering if Percival was there, and if he knew that she was not far off, and if he was trying to win over his father to give his consent, besides many other 'ifs' which somehow made her heart ache and turned all her pleasure into pain. Before they reached home, however, her courage returned. She even found comfort in the idea that Percival might be at Stacey, though ignorant of her nearness to him,

and she determined not to make her life useless with weary longings. Sara had learnt a great deal of self-control during these few sad weeks.

It was late when they reached home, and when tea was ended Sara, hearing the church bell, went off to the evening service.

Virginia was there, and they came out together.

'Dear Sara, why haven't you been to see us to-day? It's quite true, father insists on our going away. He is very angry about your mother.'

'No, no, he must not be. Oh, Virginia, try to make the peace. If only he would come to us!'

'I am sure he won't! In some ways father is very proud. He says nothing, but he has forbidden us to go to the rectory. From him that is a positive order.

You know when he once says a thing we dare not disobey.'

Sara could have cried, but she too was proud, so she resisted the wish.

'I shall be left alone. I can't go and hunt up Herringham! Mother would never allow that.'

'Oh, Sara, that horrid money! It won't bring you any luck. I said so when I first heard of it. Why, you look quite pale and worried. Even Caradoc won't know you. Come home with me now.'

Sara looked at her watch, and consented. Her mother had said nothing about wanting her, and they did not dine till nearly eight o'clock.

How sweet the flowers smelt in the old-fashioned garden! what a feeling of peace stole over Sara as she skipped through the French window and saw her aunt packing up some books.

'Aunt Lil, don't go, don't go,' she said, putting her arms round Mrs. Gwillian's neck. 'I feel as if—as if I couldn't live at Chapel Stacey without you.'

Mrs. Gwillian's face was once more all smiles.

'Nonsense, child! Indeed, it is a good thing that we are going. Your uncle isn't looking well at all, and you know how difficult it is to make him take a holiday. Where's Herringham?'

'In the copse-field,' said Virginia. 'He said he was going to look at the wheat.'

'Then he won't be in till supper-time. Sit down, Sara, and let me look at you. Wealth hasn't made you rosy, child.'

'I am beginning to hate the money.'

'Which you haven't had yet. That's like a spoilt child.'

'Some things, of course, are nice;' and she told her aunt about Mr. Sutton's lesson

and the lovely drive her mother had taken her.

'Fancy, I had never seen Stacey Hall before!'

'I remember, however, how often you danced with Mr. Osborne on the night of our first ball. Mother, I believe Sara's blushing!' exclaimed Virginia.

'Virginia, don't joke about such things. Lord Stretton was never a favourite with your father, so I'm sure he can't be nice.'

'I'm sure he can't be,' said Sara, earnestly.

'Do you know him?' asked Virginia, with surprise.

'Oh, no, no.'

'Oh, of course the Osbornes are in deep mourning. They wouldn't have been going out. I never could bear all the gossip about him and his wife,' said Mrs. Gwil-

lian, whose sole idea of marriage was based on her own.

Scandal was positively painful to the sweet, simple soul. Sara turned the conversation.

'Where's uncle? I want to see him.'

'In the Castle wood, dear. He's marking the trees that must be cut.'

'Then I'll go to him. How I love the old castle and the moat! What games we had there as children, Virginia.'

'Why, she talks as if she were fifty years old, doesn't she, mother?'

Then Sara joined in the laugh against herself. Caradoc was heard bustling in, which meant a cheerful and noisy recognition of his dear friend. After that, Sara soon found her way to the old castle.

'The Manor always smells of lovely lavender,' she thought. 'That's the life I should like to live, and so would Percival.

We are not made for society. Oh! I hate it, hate it! It has brought me nothing but trouble, and dear Guardian would like to live here. His nature just fits in with all these simple folk.'

She surprised her uncle just as he was stooping to cut a notch in a slender stem. His hand went straight to the mark.

'Sara!'

'I want to see you alone, uncle. Kiss me, please do.'

She held up her face for the old greeting. The stern, silent man smiled.

'A silly child still. Hasn't your fine society taught you better?'

'No, no, it never will. Uncle,'—she took hold of his arm, and the two gazed at the opposite hill with the long shadows lying in fantastic shapes about its old ribs, —'uncle, have you forgiven her and me?'

'You! What nonsense, child! You are always welcome.'

'But you don't understand mother. She is very sensitive and very reserved; she wants love and kindness. She was very unhappy when she was young.'

'Is that all she told you?'

'Yes, she can't bear to mention the past. But tell me more; I want to understand it.'

'What she tells you is enough, Sara; she is your mother. Do all you can for her; a girl like you ought to--to—make her happy.'

'Somehow I feel that I—I can't. It is my fault, I suppose.'

Mr. Gwillian stood straight up. His tall, thin, spare figure overtopped Sara, though she too was tall. His eyes looked dreamily at her.

'Poor child,' he said, 'poor child!'

Sara did not know why, but the words sent a little shiver through her, and she did not answer. Presently her uncle began walking down into the moat.

'I'll walk part of the way home with you. We can get into the rectory wood, if we cut across here. Listen, Sara, I'm an old man now. When you were born, after your mother wrote and told me of the fact, I answered her that, as long as I had a roof over my own head, I should consider it your home as well as mine. You have been here a great deal, and I think you have been happy with us.'

'Indeed, uncle, I look back upon those days as the happiest of my life. I can never be grateful enough.'

'It's not a case of gratitude. We loved you, child; but there are things a man cannot forget. Your mother refused my

advice and my sympathy. Good, she chose her own path. Even now she might have had them, for your sake, child; but she deliberately insults—well, refuses advice. I wash my hands of her. Never mention the subject again. For you it is as it has always been; but for her—our paths diverge. I can say no more to her child. But keep in your own natural, straightforward path, Sara. Don't let this money choke the good seed. Remember how hardly will those that have riches find the straight and narrow way. Money is the root of all evil; remember that.'

Sara smiled through a few tears.

'Dear uncle, you know I neither sought nor wished to be rich. It came to me. Already the idea of it has hurt me. I mean that it has already brought me suffering. You need not fear it's becoming a "snare" to me, or anything else but a great bother,

unless I can do good to somebody.—Uncle, don't go away and leave me.'

'I never change my mind, Sara. You know that.'

Yes, Sara knew it, but she knew too that it was seldom that her uncle's mind ever planned anything that was not for the good of others.

'Aunt Lil says you want change. Oh, I am selfish. I can't think why I am so silly. It is lovely weather; I am going to study music as if my daily bread depended on it, and I shall sketch and drive with mother. Really I have everything to make me happy except that I shall want you all. I'm horridly selfish.'

'No, not selfish you were never that. But, child, keep straight on to the narrow path, and—God help you.'

They parted soon after. Mr. Gwillian seemed loth to walk where he might meet

his sister, and soon he strode away, after again kissing his niece.

'God bless you, child! God bless you and take care of you.'

He walked like a man who is unconscious of his path. His brows were knitted, his tall form looked severe drawn out against the twilight.

'She doesn't know, she doesn't know,' he muttered. 'She believes in her mother. She doesn't guess that her mother hates her, and that she told me so years ago, years ago when Sara was born. Poor child, poor child. It is unnatural, cruel, but—why has Lucy come back here? I will have nothing to do with it, nothing. I will not be made a party to any of her plans. She has the pride of the devil and some of his cleverness.'

CHAPTER IV.

A RETROSPECT.

Whilst Sara was walking among the green mounds of the old castle, her mother was re-arranging the rectory furniture according to her superior taste. With Lumb's help, there was now great improvement in the look of the drawing-room. The rector and his wife were evidently entirely devoid of artistic perceptions, whilst Lucy Beddoes had that innate sense of the beautiful which is apparently born with some people and needs but little cultivation. On the

other hand, Lucy had but one accomplishment: she sang very well. Her voice had never been highly trained, but she could sit down to the piano and delight all listeners. For many years, however, she had seldom afforded anyone this pleasure, for though she diligently kept up her natural gift, she rarely allowed people to hear her. She had made a vow when Douglas Osborne jilted her that she would never sing again to give others pleasure, and she had kept her vow as regards all strangers.

To-day, when she had made the room as pretty as was possible under the existing circumstances—for all the furniture was too heavy for the room—she dismissed Lumb, and walked upstairs to Sara's boudoir. This was certainly the prettiest room in the place, for one of its windows looked far away over the hills, and as it

had an east as well as a south window, it was always sunny and cheerful.

Lucy Beddoes looked round and scanned Sara's books, then she took up her music and ran her eyes over it; next she thought, 'Her voice is not good, at all events there is one thing in which we need not be rivals.'

She sat down to the piano and her beautiful, rich, soft contralto filled the room. She rose smiling, 'Douglas will soon ask me to sing again,' and these words caused her mind to go off into new pastures of thought.

She sat down in a large arm-chair, and throwing back her head she gazed at the distant view, without, however, taking in its real beauty. What she saw was all upon the psychic plane. She had always been a proud, strong-willed, passionate

girl. Her father was a cold, stern man, and their wills had very early clashed. Her education had been somewhat neglected and left too much to ignorant governesses, but Lucy had always got the better of her teachers by a quiet strength of will, which universally left her mistress of all disputed fields. Her mother, a fretful invalid, had never counted for much in the household, which was ruled by the father and the daughter; for the brother, a shy, silent boy, went his own way and never struggled for any mastery except that of doing as he chose in his own time and in his own manner.

Lucy looked back upon her old self now with real interest. She remembered her heart-burnings, her impotent anger because of the family poverty, and her boundless pride and boundless ambition,

which chance appeared to be about to gratify when young Osborne fell desperately in love with her.

Lucy remembered the first period of unalloyed happiness, not lessened but heightened because she kept it a close secret from all her home people. She remembered the delight of stolen interviews and the greater happiness of her lover's protests of fidelity, which she never once doubted, and indeed Douglas Osborne was a lover to be proud of.

'I loved him—I loved him with all my heart and soul,' she now said softly aloud, clasping her hands over her head, 'and to think the crash came and I did not die! I remember thinking I should kill myself, but pride stopped me. I thought——' But even at this moment she could not linger over the black thoughts of that period, though she distinctly remembered

them. The worst and the best was that so few people knew. 'It was my brother who found us out one day, and he told father. I shall never forgive him, never.' The pain she suffered was intensely real, intensely strong, she could never again, she thought, go through as much suffering, for that time had killed all superficial feeling. It had not, however, destroyed her will, neither had it killed her pride. She could well recall the impotent rage that had filled her, and the desire to show Douglas Osborne that she did not care! But here the girl had reckoned without counting the cost. Her love had been a very, very real thing. It had been part of her life, part of her very being, and the desire to revenge herself, by following Douglas's example, had not ended in a satisfactory manner. Captain Beddoes was good-natured, if rather wild and rather

heedless, and in the main a kind-hearted man. He had proposed in haste, having seen pretty Miss Gwillian at a flower-show, and he was himself surprised at the ease of his victory. Poor man! he was to know the reason when the knot was tied, and when he could do nothing but make the best of a bad bargain.

Lucy did not dwell on *his* feelings, she was only reviewing her own. She remembered the horror of the moment when she felt bound to keep her vow, and to marry the man about whom she cared nothing. For one moment she had repented, she had looked round for some help, and she had appealed to her brother, but his views of honour were narrow and unbending.

'You deserve all you have got, Lucy. You were awfully deceitful about Lord Stretton, and now he's paid you out. If you want to get out of this engagement

I'm sure no honest man will speak to you again. You accepted Captain Beddoes of your own free will, no one made you do so, and I'm sure father won't countenance any more dishonourable dealings.'

Lucy was turned to stone with suppressed anger and pride. She answered nothing, no one heard any more about breaking off the engagement; indeed, her father encouraged it, for the Stretton business had brought him endless worry and annoyance from the family. At a hint from his son he had added his own advice.

'Lucy, you must marry Captain Beddoes or leave my house. Your clandestine——'

Lucy had not even listened to the end of this sentence. She was married, but suffered intensely.

When her baby was born she had written a letter to her brother, a letter which he,

a happy husband, had burnt as too shocking to keep in his house. In that epistle Lucy had told him that it was his fault that she was an unhappy wife, and that it was also his fault that she hated her child and always would hate it.

Lucy had written this to ease her own conscience. There was a faint particle of truth in it. If her brother had been of a different nature, if his views had been less upright, he might have understood the pride that had wilfully injured that which was noblest in her womanhood; but, on the other hand, he was not answerable for his nature. In his eyes Lucy was a deceitful, dishonourable woman; worse, her conduct was decidedly wicked. He had summoned up all the Christian fortitude and patience he possessed in order to answer her letter as became a gentleman.

Their father was now dead, the past was

buried. Not even to his wife had he ever revealed the old story. In his letter he offered a home to the unloved child of the unloved husband. Since then their intercourse had been merely on surface matters, but Lucy had never forgiven him.

At last Lucy's meditations reached the period when she had become a widow. She was free, and she knew how to use her freedom. She said that she would realize her young dream, but how and when? She did not know; but there are some minds so capable of firmly sticking to an idea, that fate seems to bend itself to their will and to grant them their wishes.

'If chance favours me,' Lucy thought, 'I shall be ready,' and true enough that time had come when chance favoured her, and Lucy was prepared for it.

Now it was the present time which was to her the most difficult to realize. Her own

affairs had so strangely mixed themselves up with Sara's large fortune that they had become much complicated. She felt disturbed by this complication, which now appeared as part of the same thing, and disagreeably mixed up with it. Worse, another difficulty had quite lately appeared on the scene. Something Douglas had said.

'Douglas!' She dwelt on the name, she softly said it aloud, listening to the sound, for she had never said it aloud since that terrible day when a short severe note from his mother had told her that she was forsaken. Now she said it again, 'Douglas,' wondering if the old love, the mad, passionate love of her youth, would fly back to her on the wings of the past, and whether she would feel once more that exquisite thrill which she remembered so vividly.

'It will come back,' she said, suddenly

starting up, 'it will, it must. He loved me through it all—but he could not love me well enough to give up something for me. Will that thought always thrust itself in—always ?'

She sat down again and closed her eyes. She wanted to cheat time, to blot out the middle period, to believe she had never had a child, and that she could give him her first, her best love.

'And yet it was his fault,' she murmured, 'his, entirely his; shall I ever forget that? If I could—if I could—then I could believe in everything again. I could get the old feeling back, I could love; and now, I can't love as I did formerly. The feeling is as strong, stronger perhaps, but it is different.' As she said this she knelt down by the chair and rested her fair head against the cushion in it. 'I want to love—I want to love,' she

moaned. 'I want to love in the old way; now it seems to burn like fire.'

Suddenly Lord Stretton's words came back to her. It could not be as before. He had a son, and this son would, when she became Lady Stretton, take away half the fortune, and thus he would be independent of his father, and could marry Sara, leaving them poor. No one could hinder them. They would be very rich, whilst she and Douglas would most likely have to leave the old place and to live abroad. The other alternative would be living as Sara's pensioner, and against this all the strength of her strong pride rebelled. This was the irony of fate. It could not be as it was before, because everything was altered. In the old days she would have laughed at poverty, but now she dreaded it. She wanted the power, she wanted to show her brother that, after all,

she had been born for a high estate. As to living abroad—why, there she might be Lady Stretton or she might be Mrs. Jones, it mattered little. English noblemen abroad always lost caste.

And then Sara would enjoy it all—all that should be her mother's by right, the place and the position and the wealth. No, no, that should never be!

It was not mere sordid gold that attracted Lucy, it was the power of wealth; she wanted to rule, she felt that it was her right to rule.

True, she had attained her aim, the object of her life, but now that it was within her grasp she found that it was sadly mutilated. The golden ball was made but of glass, very thinly gilded within! But that Sara would one day enjoy the real thing, this was what she could not bring herself to face with patience. Sara, the

unloved child of the unloved husband; Sara, whom fortune seemed to have tenderly watched over and even endowed with great wealth, that was too hard to bear—all the harder because Lucy knew, which no one else did, that it was partly her own fault. She had despised this cousin of her husband, who was always full of plans and always a failure. She had been irritated by his want of stedfastness, and still more irritated when she found that Captain Beddoes had lent him money. She had shown her dislike in that nameless fashion which men easily find out. Had she been kind to him, most likely he might have paid his debt to her husband by endowing her with his mine of wealth.

Ah! then she would have brought all that wealth to Douglas, and he would have been independent of any dead wife's money. Her triumph would have been perfect.

She dwelt on this thought till it became beautiful. She gazed at it as we gaze at a glorious sunset. It fascinated her till at last reality again showed its plain face. Her slender income was a mere drop in the ocean, and by marrying him she deprived him of what he was already enjoying. The thought was extremely galling to her deep-seated pride.

Then again she raised her head and gazed at the distant view; a faint blue hill was drawn out against a fainter sky.

'The hill is very, very far off, but if one travelled to it, then one could see it was a real solid mountain,' she thought.

On her psychic plane she saw one thought drawn out faintly just as she saw the blue hill, and at the end of the thought she said,

'It shall not be.'

Only in one way could her dream be

realized, and that seemed utterly impossible.

Then she shivered a little, though the evening was sultry.

CHAPTER V.

A NEW ARRIVAL.

Sara's good resolutions were not as easy to keep as she had expected. She was very steadfast to her music and she enjoyed Mr. Sutton's lessons, but now that her uncle, her Aunt Lil, and Virginia were all gone, the feeling of loneliness fell upon her with a strange, dead weight which was entirely new to her. At times the longing to see or hear something of Percival was overpowering. Was he, perchance, at Stacey Hall? No, she

did not think so, had he been he would have come to see her, he *must* have come. But he was so honourable that even that certainty was not sure, as she said to herself, laughing at her Irishism. She ransacked the house for books, but evidently the rector liked only very solid reading, and Sara felt that few novels were countenanced in this melancholy house. She made some good resolutions about solid reading, and sometimes she would sit book in hand in the drawing-room all the evening, whilst her mother began working some alms-bags. For two people to be quite happy in silence there must be, as all know, perfect sympathy between them. In Sara's mind, on the contrary, there seemed to be an unreasoning dread which only increased as the days went on. She began to dislike the *tête-à-tête* with her mother when the lamps were brought in,

and she was always glad when Mrs. Beddoes found some excuse or other to leave her alone. Had Sara not been much engrossed with her own thoughts, and had not this strange uneasiness sprung up, she must at times have wondered at her mother's long absence, which occasionally could not be explained.

A little incident put another doubt into her mind, a doubt which she hated herself for entertaining, but which at last became a certainty. One morning, as Sara was getting ready for Mr. Sutton, she received a telegram from him saying that the serious illness of a grandchild prevented his appearing that day. It was a beautiful morning, and Sara was seized with a desire for a long walk on the hills.

'As Mr. Sutton isn't coming, mother, I shall take a ramble over the hills. It will do me good.'

'It is a pity to give up your music,' said Mrs. Beddoes, dreamily.

She was arranging some flowers.

'I know it is wrong, but sometimes one may give oneself a holiday.'

'Where shall you go? I am going in the village to see some poor people.'

'Oh, mother! I did not know you visited here. How good of you.'

'And where do you want to go?' repeated Mrs. Beddoes, coldly.

'Oh, right away to Sudwick. If I walked quickly——'

'Then you will take the hill road?'

'Yes, why not?'

'I don't much like you to walk alone.'

'Alone! Oh, I know the country so well. Herringham used to take us for miles along the hill-tops, and we know the puzzling hollows nearly as well as the natives.'

'Come straight home the same way. I may come and meet you.'

'That would be kind! Do come when you have done your visiting.'

Mrs. Beddoes left the room, and Sara passed into her own room to get ready. She delayed some time, however, for she sat down and fell into musing on the strange alterations of her life, so that when at last she roused herself she saw that she must hurry. By going out of the back gate it was possible to reach at once the road which led up straight upon the mountain; but, just as Sara was hastening out, she thought,

'If I cross this end of the wood, I can get up by the waterfall valley, and that cuts off a long bit of the winding road.'

She turned back, and, going down the rocky drive, she entered the wood. She hurried quickly along the path, bent upon

making up for lost time, when, suddenly looking up, she saw two forms walking in front of her, but in a path cut higher up upon the rising ground. Sara stopped short, for she had heard no one was allowed in the wood; but the next moment she recognised her mother's soft plumed hat, that became her so well. She was taking the arm of a stranger. He was tall and of fine proportion. There could be no doubt that he was a gentleman, but also there was no mistaking that these two were on very intimate terms. The man bent his head a little down, so as to see his companion's face better, and Sara could hear a little murmur of voices as if their conversation was very interesting.

Sara dared not proceed. Who was the man? What did this mean? There was but one answer possible; but then who was he?

For one moment Sara's heart bounded with joy. Her mother had found some one to love, some one who loved her; but the next instant, as she hurried back and ran out of the wood rather like a thief, she thought,

'Why this secrecy? what is there in it which is private?—from me, too? I should be the first to rejoice. Oh, she will know more what it is to care about one person very, very much; she will understand better about Percival.'

Sara turned up the hills without seeing the beauties of the morning, her mind only filled with one idea, 'What does this mean? I could not be mistaken.' But when she thought, 'Shall I ask her?' Sara felt that something, some want of sympathy on her mother's side prevented this. She positively dared not ask her, but at the same time she could not help thinking,

'If this is a secret from me, was it also a secret from my uncle, and was that the reason? No, no, it can't be. I am insinuating such horrid things!'

Sara did not attain the object of her walk. Having reached the nearest summit, where stand the ruins of some old butts, she stood still and gazed at all the hills and at all the valleys winding round the foot of numberless spurs of the mountains. In the midst of this beauty she felt more than ever alone, more than ever in need of counsel.

'Mother has some one else; I see it now, she does not want me. Oh! for one talk with Aunt Lil; but even Herringham won't come near me.'

She hurried home, trying to think she might have been mistaken. Luncheon was on the table, and Mrs. Beddoes was standing waiting at the front door for her.

'Mother, you did not come to meet me. I stayed a long time at the butts, and never got to Sudwick.'

'I was in too late to meet you; there was a good deal to do in the village.'

Sara looked down on her plate, and actually blushed for her mother.

'Had her mother been in the village at all?' She felt as if she were the guilty one.

'By the way, Sara, after our drive, we must send the carriage to the station. Mr. Greenwood comes to-day.'

Sara looked up. She was almost glad to break the *tête-à-tête*. Mr. Greenwood was very agreeable, and in any case he would put an end to this feeling of dread which seemed to belong to this melancholy rectory.

As they drove along the pleasant roads, Sara looked now and then furtively at

her mother's beautiful face, wondering of what she was thinking and longing to ask for her confidence. She noticed that to-day she looked somewhat pale, and that sometimes her lips were pressed firmly together as if she were making up her mind to some difficult course of action. Their conversation was quite on the surface, and Sara's only supposition was that this new secret, which she had unwittingly discovered, accounted for her mother's absent-minded ways.

Mr. Greenwood arrived punctually. His coming was like a breath of London society, and though to Sara this seemed a little out of place, she was glad of any change, so that she tried to put away her own feelings and received him very graciously.

'This is indeed a charming country,' he said, when he had sauntered round the garden before dinner. 'I congratulate

you, Mrs. Beddoes, in being so far from the world and its allurements. How does Shelley put it?

"Forget the world's dull scorn."'

'I think,' said Lucy, with one of her sweet smiles, 'that the world would call ours "dull scorn" if we made comparisons. No, this is a beautiful retreat, and I am glad to rest here.'

'Sometimes the country is more tiring than town. Callers are more importunate.'

'We have had very few. The great people are abroad, or still in town, not here anyhow.'

'I wonder who *he* is?' thought Sara. 'Certainly somebody who is not a mere nobody, of that I am sure,' and she smiled, enjoying her little mystery now that she was no longer alone with her mother.

'Then we will enjoy ourselves in our

own way. Miss Beddoes shall show me what to admire. But I must own to thinking this a melancholy abode, though set in a perfect casket of scenery.'

'The front door,' exclaimed Sara. 'Yes, I hate it! It is so extremely odd! By the way, mother, now that Mr. Greenwood is here, do unlock the little side door into the garden, for he will defend us from robbers.'

'I prefer to keep it shut. The maids might use it, and in a place which has two miles of wood close to it, one cannot be too careful,' said Mrs. Beddoes.

'Two miles of wood,' thought Sara; 'yes, mother wants that herself.'

'I am not superstitious,' said Mr. Greenwood, 'but certainly this house might make some people

"Write strange dreams upon the brain."'

'Pray don't say such things,' said Lucy,

'a house so soon gets a bad name. But I assure you I have been planning excursions for your entertainment.'

'Pray don't put yourself to any trouble on my account. Give Gaythorne Greenwood country walks, such hostesses as are here to be found, a book and a cigar, and he requires nothing more.'

'You are very good to come at all. I know you have at least a dozen invitations to fashionable houses,' said Lucy.

'I take no account of them! Though, by the way, one of them is to a house very near here.'

'Which is that?' asked Lucy.

'Stacey Hall. You know I ran over to Paris for a week. I stayed at the same hotel as young Osborne and his sister. When they come home, they mean to be somewhat more lively than heretofore.'

Sara, looking at her mother, saw her

blush, and she concluded it was the mention of Percival which annoyed her, but how glad she herself was of even this slight news.

'When do they come home?' asked her mother.

'I don't know. They have gone on to Italy.'

'What do you think of Miss Osborne?'

'I don't think she possesses "a raven's heart within a dove," more likely "a dove's heart within a raven," for she is decidedly doleful, and her brother seems dull too. They have left their father to amuse himself. Is he at home?'

'No one has yet called on us. We know nothing of the gossip,' said Mrs. Beddoes.

'I don't know him. These two were indebted to me for getting them out of

an awkward situation with a Paris cabby, hence my invitation.'

'It is time to go and dress,' said Lucy, and she led the way indoors.

As she walked, Gaythorne noticed the beautiful figure and the dignified bearing of his hostess. He forgot to look at Sara.

'Sara, will you play us that Nocturne?' said her mother, after dinner. 'The evening is so warm that it sounds delicious as one walks on the terrace.'

Sara obeyed with pleasure. She could play and think.

Mrs. Beddoes walked up and down the gravel with Gaythorne as he smoked his cigar. As the twilight increased, the rabbits scampered on the farthest lawn bordering the wood. Among them appeared one pure white in colour, and Lucy pointed it out.

'In old days that would have been called a witch in disguise.'

'Or a fairy seeking to disenchant a lovely princess.'

'You know why I have asked you here now?' said Lucy, pointedly.

'Because you are goodness itself, and you mean to give me a chance. Is she really well disposed towards me? I am entirely in your hands, but I assure you if my wishes——' He paused, adding to himself, 'If you knew that it's a case of necessity, and that Gaythorne Greenwood will soon come to grief if he cannot win a woman with a fortune, you would not need to urge him unduly.'

'I know. Sara is—perhaps I ought to say it—slightly *éprise* of a young man she met in London. For various reasons the match is impossible, forbidden on both sides, so you have leave to win the fair lady.'

She laughed a little.

'Your daughter is more charming than ever, a country life suits her.'

Gaythorne hardly knew what to say. He heard Sara's sympathetic playing through the open window, but her mother's graceful lithe figure was as picturesque, or rather more picturesque, than even Sara in all her youth. She possessed a dangerous attractive power which Gaythorne, an old apprentice in women's ways, understood well enough; and yet, to do her justice, he saw at once that she did not in the least seek to attract him for herself. The attraction was quite in spite of herself.

He had not solved the mystery, he only knew that for some reason or other Mrs. Beddoes was pressing him to take what he earnestly desired, that was Sara with the inseparable condition of her large fortune.

He was a little disturbed to hear of this other rival, but he saw distinctly that the rival had no chance with the mother.

That evening, when he was left alone to smoke in the parish-room luxuriously arranged for his comfort, he decided on his plan of campaign. Sara had to be won, and how best was this to be done? Gaythorne Greenwood was in a position which made action necessary, and Mrs. Beddoes appeared to him in the light of a charming goddess working the machinery of his complicated existence. There was no need to question why, he had but to do his best to win this simple girl. After all, she was singularly straightforward; he would have preferred a more exciting siege, something more difficult to conquer, but people with complicated characters were usually poor or were hedged in by other difficulties. Mrs. Beddoes would have been more to his

taste, he would have liked to have won that fair lady, but she made no pretence of liking him, and she had several times told him that she was poor.

'Of course Sara must provide handsomely for her mother,' he thought, letting the smoke wreath itself round his slender fingers, '*cela va sans dire*, but she is so simple, she will naturally wish that. I expect it will be the duty of her husband to save her from a too grasping and necessitous widow. Surely a man can do anything he wants to do in a week? My little trip to Paris had some good result. I made the acquaintance of those Osbornes. I can go shooting there this autumn, and finish the romance from Stacey Hall. Unless—why not?—I might marry her straight off and borrow on it, and no lack of lenders in that case. The want of money is the root of all evil; without it, all

one's schemes fall to the ground; and after all, Miss Sara will make a charming wife, who can be trusted to stay at home whilst her husband enjoys a few bachelor trips to Paris.'

So reasoned Gaythorne Greenwood. It was late when he retired to bed, but he found the impeccable Lumb ready to escort him and to valet him. Lumb was certainly a treasure for two ladies, he knew exactly what was required, and he was chary of his words. Gaythorne went to bed in the state of an actor who has got up an important part which he will act in public the next day. All true artists are nervous about their success, though certain that they act well. Such was Mr. Greenwood's state of mind before he fell asleep. But the next thought was, 'I'll woo my lady in the woods, there's something confoundedly melancholy in this old rectory. Anyhow,

I am well embarked, and every sea has its shoals.'

And Gaythorne Greenwood slept the sleep of the just.

Not so Mrs. Beddoes, for when she retired to rest she was still troubled with many thoughts.

She had been talking earnestly to Lord Stretton this morning about the future. Once more he had pleaded the cause of the young people.

'Let them marry, Lucy. We shall have our own happiness to think of, and if we are poor—why, we can all live together.'

'Never, Douglas! I want you all to myself. Have I waited all these years to share you with—with *her* children?'

This delicate flattery, though mixed with unreasonable, womanly jealousy, conquered him.

'Well, then, we can go abroad and have

it all our own way. My dearest, I go about all day as if I were in a dream which is too beautiful to be real. But I wish we were nearer to each other. To-morrow I cannot come till the evening. I can ride back in the moonlight, but how can you manage to see me?'

'I will let you in by the small door. No one uses it, and there is a room next to it which is private. Mr. Greenwood will be in the house.'

'Ah! By the way, Lucy, do you know that I have a curiosity to see your child?'

'No, no, don't talk of her, Douglas. When Sara is married——'

'To Percival?'

'No, to Gaythorne Greenwood—then I shall feel free—free at last.'

'Poor girl!'

Lucy made an impatient gesture, and Lord Stretton had to sue for pardon. He

had never loved the girl Lucy as he loved this woman. She overmastered him, and he was her slave, her willing slave.

CHAPTER VI.

NOT WANTED.

'From the old shooting-butts four or five counties can be seen,' said Lucy, as she started with Sara and Mr. Greenwood on the upland road. 'We can, if you like, easily walk up there before luncheon-time.'

Three days had gone by, and Gaythorne had been assiduous in his attention to Sara, but in all honesty he could not flatter himself that he had made much progress in his wooing. Not that Sara shunned him; on the contrary, she was so

frankly pleasant, so simple and so straightforward, that he had found very little opportunity for ordinary love-making. There is a simplicity which is in truth more baffling than any other human weapon of defence. Besides this, Gaythorne fancied that Mrs. Beddoes was watching him closely, and that she had already criticised his love-making; altogether he was, metaphorically speaking, beginning to feel up a tree.

'We have to thank you for bringing us uninterrupted fine weather,' continued Lucy, 'but this morning I think it feels very sultry.'

'The weather is always adorable,' said Gaythorne; 'in all its moods it offers us food for consideration.'

'Only to those who have nothing else to talk about,' answered Mrs. Beddoes, gently.

'And to a few clever people who won't talk of more serious things,' said Gaythorne.

'We can't always live in an atmosphere uninfluenced by wind or weather.'

'Or below freezing-point.'

They had now reached the turn of the road leading to the rectory wood. Here they paused a moment, and Mrs. Beddoes sat down on a grey rock by the roadside.

'It is really very sultry. I must go back to the house and find another jacket. Go on, please; I shall overtake you.'

'Let me go back instead, mother,' said Sara; 'you look so tired.'

'No, no; go on. If I feel unequal to the walk, you must bring Mr. Greenwood back by luncheon-time.'

Mrs. Beddoes would hear of no other plan, and reluctantly Sara gave in, so she

and Mr. Greenwood slowly walked on; but Sara, happening to glance back, fancied that she saw her mother pass through the gate into the wood. She blushed as she thought, 'Mother has gone to—to see him. Why has she left me alone with Mr. Greenwood—why?' A feeling of intense shyness took possession of her, and then suddenly her courage returned.

'Why should I mind? How foolish I am! He is our guest;' and she eagerly began to talk about the first subject that came uppermost to her mind.

'Do you like Paris, Mr. Greenwood? I have never been out of England, but I am longing to do so. I had half hoped that mother would go abroad instead of coming here, but she wanted rest.'

Sara thought how foolish were her remarks. Mr. Greenwood would put her down as being very silly, but of what con-

sequence were his conclusions? She little guessed that the clever man of the world by her side was feeling as much, or more than she did the difficulty of the situation, though nothing of this feeling was apparent in his answer.

'Paris is a delightful place. I should like to take you all round the old parts of it; most English ladies only see a tiny corner of it.'

'But, after all, what can be more beautiful than this country? I like London because of the concerts, but everything is dull unless one has just the right person with one.'

Gaythorne laughed.

'I should always find you the right person. You would enjoy everything. You are not *blasé*.'

'I suppose,' said Sara, joining in his laugh, 'that is the way you would put it

to any lady of your acquaintance, isn't it?'

Gaythorne was again confronted with the difficulty of Sara's perfect candour. 'Strong is the power of white simplicity,' he said to himself, being an admirer of Keats' poetry. Evidently compliments were wasted on her, she did not even believe them; but to-day, to-day, he must make the supreme effort. Had not Mrs. Beddoes left them together on purpose?

'Indeed, Miss Beddoes, you are quite wrong. You do not simply accept everything that you are told without giving it further thought. I assure you that is very refreshing. In these days young ladies scarcely vary their conversation, whether they happen to be in Florence or in London.'

'There are so many things that I want to do, and more that I want to know. I

think life in London crushes one's individuality. One gets to talk and to think like everybody else around one, but here one can think and feel for one's self.'

'Still, it's no use being too much in earnest except about—about one's own personal happiness,' said Gaythorne, feeling strangely stirred to be in earnest; for by this time Sara had become an individual to him, and not merely the heiress whom he must win in order to avoid a crash.

'Happiness! yes, of course, one does want to be happy, and then—then something steps in and prevents it. I wonder if happiness is purely an imaginary state of being?'

Gaythorne laughed.

'Certainly not. To be quite free from care, also from money troubles, to have good health and good spirits, and to spend

your life with a woman who has a mind, these things are by no means imaginary pleasures.'

Sara felt that she had better now try another subject. Something told her that Mr. Greenwood was going to 'say something.' Could she prevent him before she got back to the shelter of her home? She must. She walked on briskly with her quick, free step, and her head a little thrown back to catch the few lazy breezes which now and then wearily swept over the hills. There was a far-off look in her eyes, which Gaythorne had only learnt to notice since his stay at the rectory, and it made him feel that Sara, with all her advantages, was not happy.

'Her mother is the cause of this,' he thought, 'I'm not at all sure whether the girl is as simple as I fancied; anyhow, she has plenty of character, for she has a very

strong look in her eyes. I can't win her by compliments, that's a certainty. They fall like a dead weight, and only make me look like a fool! Her head is that of a pure Venetian, she reminds me of a Leonardo; but you can't make love to a picture, and she gives me not a whit more encouragement.'

For a while he was silent, arguing against himself; then he awoke to the beauty of the scene before him, for Gaythorne Greenwood was easily moved by beauty both in nature and in womankind.

'No wonder you love these hills!' he exclaimed. 'Ah! there is a blackcock on the wing, and another. The shooting here must be excellent.'

'Poor birds! I hate to think they will soon be killed. They are so free and happy now.'

'Freedom is a word with very little

meaning in it. No one is free, there is always some unpleasant fetter which a man drags about with him, though he hides it carefully. In some ways a woman is freer than a man.'

'Oh, no, no,' said Sara, laughing, 'we are not free at all.'

'When you come of age, Miss Beddoes, you certainly will be freer than most girls, only of course you may be bothered by people who will try to take advantage of you.'

'Ah! that horrid money!'

'You must let some one help you who is——' With Sara's truthful eyes looking at him he could not say the word 'disinterested.'

'I shall try and not think of it. It has already been a bother to me.'

'How so? Was your guardian an infliction?'

'Oh, no, no. I felt quite—quite safe with him. He, at all events, was disinterested. But I hope to learn how to spend money well, I want to do good with it. I shall try to help the waifs and strays of society, and I want to build public kitchens where people may buy cheap dinners. Good food and good education can't do harm. Giving money away, Guardian says, always does harm.'

'The man you marry will be proud to help you;' and as Gaythorne said this, for the moment he felt it, so easily can pure-minded women impart enthusiasm to men.

'Yes, I hope so,' said Sara, looking away and gazing at the many valleys about her. 'Shall we go on, Mr. Greenwood? I can take you home down by a deep hollow where there is a delightful

miniature stream. When my cousins and I were children, we had names for every rivulet on the Highmynd; to us they were far more important than the Thames or the Mississippi.'

'Wait one moment, Miss Beddoes.'

Sara had risen from a great boulder on which she had been resting. Oh, she thought, what is coming? What should she do? Why had her mother left her?

'We shall be late,' she said, hurriedly.

'No, but I must speak now. Miss Beddoes, you don't understand my difficulty, you are not like other girls who——'

'Please don't,' gasped Sara, 'you don't know or understand.'

'Your mother gave me leave.'

'Yes, of course you are very kind, but——'

'Won't you listen to me? Come back this same way and I will tell you. I have loved you ever since——'

'Don't, please, please,' said Sara, hurrying on, yet too polite to leave him; she could easily have done so by disappearing down one of the intricate coombs.

'Only listen to me. You will find many men ready to make fair promises to you because of——but there will be few to love you.'

'Yes, I know, I know; but I am not of age, I may not choose yet.'

'Indeed, I have your mother's consent to tell you that all the love which a man can give I will give you. Sara, listen, your life shall be one long holiday if you will be my wife, you shall do as you like. You will have but to command me, I shall only be your right hand and do your bidding, I shall be your willing slave.'

'Indeed, I don't want a willing slave;' and Sara hid a smile, for she could not help being a little amused at the clever Mr. Greenwood figuring in the capacity of a slave. He would not be stopped, however.

'Let me tell you everything. You know that I am called a man of the world. In a certain sense it is true, but it is just because I know all the fine ladies who cannot be compared with you, that I can appreciate your goodness, your truth, indeed——'

'Indeed, you don't understand, how can I tell you? I can't love anyone. I can't really. You are very kind, and you were kind to us in London, but mother should have told you.'

'She did. She said that there was someone who wished to marry you, but whom it is impossible that you should marry.'

Sara raised her head proudly, she felt stronger now.

'I know why mother will not hear of it, she thinks his family will despise me.'

'Then won't you turn your mind towards someone who will think that there is no woman in England to compare with you?'

'No, no,' said Sara, desperately, for flattery made her recoil. 'I can't listen to you, I care for somebody else, oh, very much indeed, and if I am not allowed to—to marry him, then I won't marry anyone.'

Gaythorne Greenwood had not expected quite so much determination on Sara's side. What could he do? For one moment he wondered if there was a possibility of running away with an heiress. The idea was romantic certainly, but rather too old-fashioned; besides, it was impossible, for Sara did not look at all like a girl who

would fall into such a trap; however, he would not yet give in. Sara might be in love, the widow should have told him more definitely about this *affaire de cœur*, he felt rather taken in; but, if he understood character at all, certain he was that Mrs. Beddoes had no intention of letting her daughter marry this unknown pretender. Most likely it was some poor curate who would not know what to do with the money when he had won the girl. This idea urged him on to further efforts.

'Will you believe me when I tell you that this is all new to me, Miss Beddoes? Had I fully understood your great disinclination——'

'Oh, no, of course you didn't know. It was very good of you to care about me, but you see——'

'Yes, I see; but are you sure that you

are wise in not trusting to your mother?'

'Mother! Did she say anything?'

Sara turned towards Gaythorne as if he were now her friend. It was a strange friend to choose, but she was easily won by sympathy, and though Gaythorne's character would bear no search lights on it, still he could appreciate a perfectly pure-minded girl. Innocence, unconsciously, always surrounds itself with strong armour.

'Yes, Mrs. Beddoes said that you had some attraction towards—of course she gave me no name—but she added that it would never be allowed.'

'Never!'

'Never, she said, and in that case can't you look upon me as a friend?'

'Yes, I do. You are very kind, but—but after all I shall be of age in a few months, and I shall then be my own mis-

tress.' Sara was trying to feel rebellious, though she did not derive much comfort from the effort. Mystery is always more depressing than decided antagonism, and her mother's attitude towards her engagement was past her understanding.

'But Mrs. Beddoes says that there is opposition from—the other side,' said Gaythorne. ('Why on earth does the other side object?' thought he).

'No, I can't, but then we—oh, don't talk of it. I am very unhappy. Let us come home by the Carding mill valley, it is the shortest road, Mr. Greenwood.'

'Promise me that you will believe in my friendship? Sara, believe that I love you so much that I would willingly resign you if it were for your happiness, but if—if—Tell me how to help you?'

Sara smiled though her eyes were filled with tears. Gaythorne Greenwood had at

last found the right path in the maze of his wooing.

'You can't help me now. I mean to be brave and patient. But thank you very, very much. I did not know that you could be so kind, or that you could understand so well! Will you be still kinder, and talk no more as you did just now?'

'But I can't help loving you, even if I may never say so.'

Sara was young, and youth, in some directions, is easily influenced, whilst in other ways it can be as firm as a rock.

'You are very kind,' she repeated, though she still walked on quickly, but her tone was softened.

'Then give me your hand to prove that we are real friends.'

She did not give it to him, but he took the hand that was near him and placed it on his arm. If only he might have now

said that he had a right to protect her and to air all the other speeches which he had so carefully prepared!

'You will let me help you?' he asked, softly pressing Sara's hand before she drew it away.

'Thank you, but how can you? No, no one can. Mother must have some good reason, only—' Sara paused, she must be loyal to her mother, 'she does not understand.'

'But I do—I shall try to persuade your mother to alter her mind.'

'You! Oh, you are good and generous,' said Sara, finally taken in.

'If she won't, then I shall go on loving you, even if it is to be a long, hopeless love.'

'Please don't say that. It must be hopeless. One feels that some love is the real true thing!'

'And yet how few of us are able to obtain the real true thing. Won't you pity me a little?'

'Yes,—if—if—' She did not finish, for her mother's graceful form came suddenly into view round a corner. 'Don't tell her, don't say anything,' added Sara, in a voice of entreaty.

'But we are friends,' he said; and Sara did not contradict him.

CHAPTER VII.

MISGIVINGS.

Baveno on Lago Maggiore has escaped the modern curse of being too much under the sway of hotel-keepers; indeed, one large hotel lies silent and deserted in its beautiful grounds, looking like some haunted mansion in which the foot of man is afraid to venture. The village itself retains much of its original simplicity, and the campanile alone raises its slender tower above the quaint homes of the Italian quarrymen. The best hotel situated close to the water's edge does not disfigure the landscape, and

for those whose minds are at rest nothing can be more charming than to dream some days of life away gazing at soft Italian hills and at the lovely islands bosomed on the tinted waters. Sometimes these islands look like miniature cities of gold resting on enchanted seas, sometimes like purple swans seen against violet backgrounds, but in whatever aspect you may see them there is always the magic beauty of the lake apparently scorning the enigmas of material life.

One morning, Clara Osborne was waiting on the terrace till Percival should come down to breakfast. A small table in the big dining-room was set for them, but she was quite contented to sit gazing at the warm beauty of the morning, and with a smile to drink in a few of the exquisite effects. There was a new joy in the girl's

face, the joy of realizing some of the loveliness of God's earth. She held a sketch-book in her hand, and occasionally she jotted down a few lines indicating a sketch which she meant to take later on in the day.

Clara was very happy. She did not know that the reason of this new happiness was that she was beginning to live a life of her own instead of being entirely under the dominion of her mother. The feeling was very new and strange to her, but it smoothed away some of the frowns on the girlish brow, furrows which had almost become habitual.

She heard a step behind her, and turned round to rally her brother on his late appearance. Something in his face stopped her happy laugh.

'Oh, Percy, what is the matter? Are you ill? It is so beautiful here that I

can't think of anything else. Have you had a letter from——'

'I had a bad night,' he said, leaning over the parapet, and listening to the splash of the lazy waves. 'It's utterly foolish to be upset by dreams, but——'

'Oh, only a dream! You want your breakfast. Come in;' and Clara laughed again.

'Don't laugh; it was so real that——I imagined that all night long mother was reproaching me for being here.'

'Oh, Percival, you know that we argued all that out before starting. It is impossible.'

'I know, but——Clara, you did not hear her extract a promise from me. I feel as if I were breaking my word.'

Clare laughed again.

'You know that I should be the last to disregard mother's wishes, but we must

not deny her the possession of some common-sense.'

As they passed into the dining-room a waiter handed them some letters.

'Here is one from father to me,' said Clara; and, after reading it, she smiled.

'He is perfectly happy. He tells us all that he is doing. If we stay a fortnight longer here we can go home, and there will be all the autumn and winter for us to take care of him. What does father say to you?'

'He writes chiefly on business matters, but look at the postscript:

'"Don't hurry back on my account. I am fully occupied, and indeed I find that, for several reasons, I like solitude. If in the future anything should oblige me to go abroad, I shall be glad to feel that everything here will be in perfect order." Clara, what does that mean?'

'I don't know, I'm sure, unless he means that he thinks I should object to stay too much at Stacey.'

'Does it? I don't understand. Indeed, Clara, I can't get over my impression that something is wrong. Suppose—I have thought the matter over till I am fairly puzzled—suppose this strange refusal to consent to my engagement has something to do with——'

'How can it, Percy? If he wanted to marry again, he would wish you away and me too. By the way, do you know about mother's will? She told me once, but I had forgotten it. If father marries again, we are to have all her money—at least, all her personal income, not, of course, what was sunk on the property.'

'That would cripple my father!'

'It is a safeguard against his marrying again. But I feel sure he won't do it. I

mean to make him happy, and to give him no time to think of such a thing.'

'Thank you, Clara; I wish we had begun sooner.'

'Why didn't you tell me sooner? You mean, why did I not begin sooner to appear more cheerful?'

'Life seems too complicated just now. Clara, I must go home.'

'And spoil our happy time!' Clara's brows were quickly knitted together.

'I don't want to do that, you know.'

'To-day we shall drive to Orta. I must make a sketch there, and you can climb the Sacre Monte. If you were a Catholic, you would make vows.'

Percival resigned himself, and the two started off in a carriage for their charming expedition. The day was fine, the drive was lovely, and the end of their pilgrimage as romantic as possible, but all the while

Percival's thoughts were wandering homewards.

Just as they were preparing to return, Percival caught sight of a college friend, who was examining the few stalls left standing in the market.

'Hulloa, Osborne! Well, that is strange to meet here!'

'Yes, it's very odd, except that in these days everybody is everywhere. You don't know my sister Clara, Mr. Montague?'

'Have you made the pilgrimage, Miss Osborne?'

The speaker was a pleasant-looking Englishman with a quaint twinkle of fun in his eyes.

'No; I left Percival to do that whilst I sketched. This is a charmingly quaint place.'

'Yes, indeed. I'm settled at Stresa with my people. We have been staying at Paris at the St. James's Hotel.'

'We were there too.'

'Oh, yes. I met Gaythorne Greenwood, who mentioned you.'

'He helped us when we were in the clutches of an insolent *cocher*. We did not know him before,' said Clara.

'He's very popular. He went back to England when we came on to Stresa. My sister says he is going to marry an heiress.'

'Indeed—who is the lady?'

'That girl that they made such a fuss about this season. "A Mine of Wealth," she was called—Miss Beddoes. We met her at parties several times. A jolly girl, with reddish hair, and not a bit affected. My sister said that she was too simple for

this man of the world. She says men like flirting girls, but I declare it's a libel on us!'

Percival said nothing, and Clara was on thorns as she answered,

'Is Mr. Greenwood really engaged?'

'Oh, I don't know—I dare say. He was always going to the Beddoes, I know; indeed, I believe he's gone to them now, so I expect it's all settled. Didn't you ever meet the girl, Miss Osborne? Greenwood says that Mrs. Beddoes has taken a house at Chapel Stacey. That's close by you, isn't it?'

'No, we didn't go out this spring,' said Clara, blushing. 'We ought to go on, Percy. Can't we give you a lift back, Mr. Montague?'

'Oh, no, thank you. Good-bye.'

The brother and sister drove on in

silence for some time; then Clara said, softly,

'Oh, Percy, it isn't true; most likely it's only gossip. Mr. Greenwood is a regular society man, and such people get talked about with everybody.'

'That's what her mother wants, I expect. My poor Sara!'

'But he can't be much of a match! Won't that worldly mother try for a peerage? But can it be true that they are at Chapel Stacey? How very strange!'

'Clara, I'm going back to-morrow. If you prefer to stay on, those people you like at our hotel will act as your chaperon.'

'No, no, I shall go home with you. We can come again. But do consider, Percival, you have promised not to go near Miss Beddoes, and it will be harder at

Stacey if she is really living only ten miles off.'

'I know, but—but I must go. I wish I had started to-day.'

Clara saw that her brother was very much disturbed by the news. She did not see the reason of his fears, but it was no good to argue further. If he went she would go too, and she must try to make up to him for the past miserable months. Clara had a strong sense of duty, which if once awakened was capable of great self-sacrifice. She determined to do her utmost to bring her father round to Percival's engagement. There must be some slight misunderstanding between them which she, perhaps, could set right.

So the next morning saw them start on their homeward journey.

'Did you sleep better?' said Clara, when they were standing on the deck of the

steamer which was carrying them swiftly away from the beautiful lake village.

'No, I didn't. Of course the subject was on my mind, but I seemed to hear Sara calling me as if she were in great distress. Clara, I *must* see her.'

'Cause and effect. You were thinking of Mr. Greenwood.'

'Sara may be made to accept him.'

'What! in these modern days! No, that is quite impossible. If she is the girl you say she is, I am sure that she will be true to you.'

'You haven't seen her mother! Clara, suppose--suppose——'

Percival stopped short, even to Clara he could not finish the sentence.

'A lover always supposes heaps of impossible things. I think if you will trust me, Percival, everything will come right. I'll call on Mrs. Beddoes directly I get

home, if so be she is at the rectory. I heard it was to let. There's only that old Mr. Swainson left in charge, a half-mad "local demon."'

'Thank you, dear. You do help me. Now I will try to put the subject away from my mind.'

So the steamer swiftly cut through the placid waters. The snow mountains appeared and disappeared again, the morning sunshine bathed every mountain and hill, every hillock and village, as if to reproach the travellers for leaving this land of beauty. Percival's mind was too much troubled by the strange ideas that crowded into his brain to enjoy the scene, but Clara put away disagreeable thoughts so as to imbibe all the beauty around her.

'Percy, it seems to me that we ought to live in beauty more than we do, then lesser evils would pass over us without

hurting us,' she said, dreamily. 'But some lives—mother's life, for instance—was all grey, all sadness. It does seem hard.'

'Marriage without love is a great wrong. A man should never give in to that. It takes away all the sunshine of two lives.'

'But if love flies away after marriage, what then?'

'*On revient toujours*,'—he stopped short. 'Clara, mother was right, my father will try to see that first love again, and something in the tone of his letter tells me that he has seen her.'

'No, no, nonsense! it is impossible! Percival, you exaggerate everything now.'

He took his sister's hand in his.

'You will help me, won't you? We shall want the consolation of all our good sense, and of all our mutual sympathy.

There's nothing like a sister's love after all.'

'I'll try, Percival, I'll try and help you, only—I ought to have begun sooner.'

CHAPTER VIII.

WEAVING THE WEB.

In the grey light of a grey afternoon, Lord Stretton walked slowly along one of the lower paths in the rectory wood. Yesterday's sunshine had been unceremoniously pushed aside by its ever near neighbour, the drizzling rain. But now the clouds had parted, and low down in the west there was a long bar of clear sky, giving—if the grey clouds did not once more close in again and revisit the earth—the promise of a fine sunset.

The expression of Lord Stretton's face was in harmony with the grey afternoon. It was clouded and serious, and though he appeared to be listening attentively, and occasionally to look behind him, it was plain that his mind had more to disturb it than the mere delay of his lady-love.

'Where can she be?' he murmured, and then he recommenced his pacing as if he must, by this action, find a solution to his riddle.

'It's confoundedly inconvenient just now. Lucy won't like it; but it must be made public some day or other, and one is sure to be found out. The only solution is for Lucy to come as a visitor to Stacey, but Clara won't hear of it, I'm sure. Now if Lucy had agreed to that other plan it would have been quite easy.'

Lord Stretton was finding out that the woman you love may have just as incon-

venient a will of her own as the woman for whom you feel no affection. The last makes a man angry, and the former makes him unhappy. He was beginning to discover that though the saying about a tangled web is decidedly trite, it is tritely true. At present, however, he comforted his conscience by saying to himself that he had done no harm to anyone, and that a gentleman was bound to respect public opinion, and not to publish his engagement too soon after his wife's death; as to Percival, whatever he might decide made no difference to such a sweet, determined angel as his Lucy.

At last his ear caught a faint rustle among last years' leaves, next a softer rustle of the sweep of a light dress, and turning hastily he saw Lucy's graceful form hastening towards him. He fell at once under the spell, for this woman had

a strong magnetic personality, though of this Lord Stretton knew nothing, and would have scorned the explanation had it been given to him. His definition was simple enough, he loved her with all his heart, he believed in her, and he worshipped her from the crown of her shining hair to the sole of her dainty feet. The mystery simply was love, love which makes or mars the beauty of the world, love which ennobles or debases all mankind.

Lord Stretton leant against the bole of a great beech-tree, and drew Lucy towards him, whilst for one supreme moment he was quite unable to say a word by reason of his deep emotion. Lucy's first appearance always had this effect upon him, he felt awkward and silent, as if a being from another world were before him, a being whose finer senses must be pained by the sound of poor human language.

The first moment of meeting had also a great charm for Lucy. In it she fully recognized and appreciated the power she possessed over the man who had once wronged her. During this supreme instant she even felt capable of forgiveness, but the next minute this first rosy dawn faded away, leaving only the cold grey of revenge, which gives warning of stormy weather. She had suffered so long and for so many years; she had suffered in many ways which she could never explain to him, and which he, not being a woman, would never understand. Her very virtues had conspired to make her what she was, and now her genius helped her fully to realize her power.

'Oh, my darling, why are you late today?' he said at last, feeling her gently disengaging herself. 'I have been expecting you for some time.'

'I couldn't get away from Mr. Greenwood.' She laughed softly. 'I had at last to say that I had an appointment to keep.'

'Anyhow, you are truthful;' and Lord Stretton joined in her laugh.

'Come up to the summer-house. We shall be quiet there. I want to talk to you.'

'And so do I. I have some news for you.'

'News! Then I hope it is good news.'

She put her hand in his arm, and they climbed the steep path together as he meanwhile imprisoned her white fingers. His courage failed him a little as they sat down, so he said, with a smile on his face,

'*Place aux dames.* Tell me your business first.'

'Sara refuses to marry Mr. Greenwood,

but you know that with my consent she shall never be—Lady Stretton.'

'Certainly not for many years, my sweet one; but can you—can we prevent it?'

'We must. I have told Mr. Greenwood that he need not despair.'

'Have you any ground for giving him hope?'

Lucy pressed her lips together, and looked slowly up into Lord Stretton's face.

'I have made up my mind to it;' and to herself she added, 'Just as I made up my mind to marry you.'

'You have sweet determined will, my Lucy, but even so—even so. No, you must be merciful. I cannot hold out for ever.'

'You must. I want you to write a letter to Sara.'

'Me? What shall I say?'

'That nothing will ever make you consent to your son's marriage with her, and that should he persevere in his attentions you will break with him. That will touch her.'

There was silence in the arbour. Lucy's voice was so soft, so musical, that what she said did not altogether convey the meaning usually attached to words. Still in this case Lucy had expressed a fact, indeed she was commanding her lover to do something, and that something very much against the grain of his inclination.

'But, Lucy, you must remember that I have had no communication with your daughter. Indeed, I have not even seen her.'

Lucy made an impatient movement.

'What does that matter?'

'But wait a moment. Can we not think of a better plan?'

'I must know best what will affect Sara.'

'Doubtless; but listen, my dearest. I had better tell you my news at once. I have had a telegram from those young people, and they will be at Stacey Hall to-night.'

'Your son and daughter? Why, I thought you told me that they would be away for several months.'

'So I thought, indeed I entreated them to stay. They give no explanation, and so I conclude that it is not health. My private opinion is that Percival can't settle down till this business is decided.'

Lucy's face flushed rosy red. Why was everything against her? She had still hopes that Sara might accept Mr. Greenwood.

What shall you do?' she asked. It

was a question which Lord Stretton had no wish to answer.

'Oh, well, what is there to do? The sooner I—well, I make a clean breast of it to them the better. I hate mysteries.'

'They will not like it. He will think that it will be a reason for marrying Sara, and altogether—— No, Douglas, promise me that you will say nothing about it.'

'But, dear sweet, it must come out some day. Why keep up useless mysteries? Besides, it will make it very difficult for me to come here. No, my idea is that I had better tell Clara of our engagement, and that you should come soon—I don't say immediately—and stay at Stacey as Clara's guest.'

'Never. Just imagine her letting me do so, or my putting up with—— No, no, no.'

Lord Stretton looked pained. He was a father as well as a lover.

'Oh, of course, that must be as you like, my dearest; but, after all—— You see, Clara will come and call upon you; she is sure to do it, and then——'

'Oh, I will return a call, of course.'

'What's the difference?'

Lucy felt more than impatient with the dulness of the masculine mind. She stood up and laughed to hide the irritation she felt.

'Really, Douglas dear, you must believe sometimes that I know best. Don't do anything rashly. As they are coming, we can't help it; but, remember, he is not to come near Sara. We will ignore his presence. Sara will do nothing underhand.'

'You are hard on them.'

'Do you repent, Douglas?' she said, in

a hard voice, though its tones were low. 'Are you wishing to give me up for them?'

'Give you up! Hush, dearest! Listen, Lucy: to give you up is quite impossible.'

Lucy laughed a little; her face lost its slight frown.

'Then let's say nothing more about it, and do nothing. Remember, Douglas, do nothing.'

'Yes, sweet tyrant, I'll do nothing. I would much prefer that than writing to Sara.'

'Come along now, I must walk. It is so grey and ugly, and Sara——'

He was her slave, and he followed where she led.

Lucy came home only just in time to say good-bye to Mr. Greenwood, who was going back to town before accepting some of his many invitations. Sara had kept

out of his way. The conversation he had with Mrs. Beddoes filled him with surprise. For some reason unknown to him, she meant him to marry Sara, so he did not yet despair of winning her in the future; but for the present it was wisest to leave her alone. Clever as he was, he could not understand the widow's plan of campaign, as he called it. Anyhow, he must arrange for another loan in town, hoping that Sara's mine would, at an early date, repay interest and principal to his money-lenders.

'Good-bye, Miss Beddoes,' he said before Lucy's entrance. 'Good-bye; and will you trust me, will you let me be your friend, and help you always when I can?'

'Thank you,' said Sara, rather wearily; 'I suppose we shall go back to London by-and-by. If so, we shall meet again.'

When he was gone, Sara and her mother

walked back into the drawing-room. Sara shivered a little as Lumb drew back the white shutters over the front door. The feeling that this house was a prison returned to her with new force, and she quickly re-entered the drawing-room. Suddenly she felt courageous; some hidden power for once compelled her to speak out before her mother.

'Mother! You made Mr. Greenwood propose to me. How could you? You don't love me; you have not any sympathy with me. I have told you that I care only about——about Percival Osborne, and that I shall never marry anyone else.'

'You shall never marry him, Sara—with my consent.'

'Then, when I am of age, I shall take the law into my own hands. Anyhow, I shall not be a beggar.'

'Nor a dutiful daughter! If I could speak—if I could explain everything, you would be the first to give up this foolish infatuation, Sara; but I can't, I will not. This would entail hurting the feelings of others. I prefer your unjust reproaches.'

Sara turned pale. Her mother's words sounded so mysterious, so terrible in a perfectly innocent mind that she felt again bound with the chain of custom and of family ties.

'Is it true? Do you mean it? But I love him so much!'

'You have no courage, Sara. You would ruin your own life without a thought.'

Sara was going to excuse and to humble herself, but suddenly she remembered the man whom she had seen walking with her mother, and her courage returned.

'My life is ruined already; I am very

unhappy. I hate this money, this gold, which has come between us, and between Percival and me. I am brave, but I won't give in to mysterious arguments which I don't understand. I won't give up Percival, and I—I mean to write to him as soon as I know where he is.'

Sara was frightened the moment she had had her say. Her mother's eyes seemed to paralyse her; for, as she looked up, she saw what she had never seen before in them, a cold gleam of hatred.

She crept away, and, flinging herself on her knees, she cried as if her heart would break.

'Mother, my own mother, hates me! I saw it in her eyes. Why am I alive? Why has Aunt Lil left me alone? Why?'

But silence alone answered her.

CHAPTER IX.

VISITORS.

Lord Stretton was at the door, waiting to receive Percival and Clara on their arrival. He looked very handsome as he stood in the summer twilight on the highest step of the home, also he seemed to be years younger than before their departure, for his face was radiant. No one could help noticing the change in him, and, as Clara kissed him she thought with a pang, 'He never looked like this when mother returned home.' Percival, too, noticed his father's joyous expression, and a strange

feeling of dread took possession of him, but the next moment he put the idea away from him. His father was simply glad to see them return home, for it stood to reason that he must have been dull without them.

'You are foolish young people to return just when the world is on the outward journey,' he said.

'Home is best, after all,' answered Clara, looking round upon the familiar rooms. 'Yes, home is nicest; one gets tired of hotels. But, father, you look quite——' She stopped short abruptly, remembering that her father ought not to look younger and happier than when he was last at Stacey. 'The country has made you young again, father. You ought to have missed us more than you seemed to have done.'

'So I did, of course—but I was very

busy. I have put off dinner for you, so now make haste and get ready.'

When they were in the dining-room, Lord Stretton was soon deep in conversation about a hundred things relating to the estate. One cottage had been repaired, a lately invented system of drainage had been tried, another cottage was let to some new people, and so on.

'Percival was quite wrong,' thought Clara, as she listened to all this, 'we need not have come home. He has been quite happy going round the estate. I knew that that other thing was impossible.'

But Percival was saying to himself, 'He has never looked like this before.' As for himself, all through dinner-time he only seemed able to recall the scene of his mother's death. He almost fancied that he was again called out of the room, and that again he returned to summon his

father, and then he rehearsed the other scene when she had bound him to keep that other woman away from Stacey.

'Have you seen anyone, sir?' he asked, suddenly.

'Oh, a few people have called. Clara will have to make a round of return visits.'

He looked at his daughter, expecting a denial or a frown; but, on the contrary, she answered, almost cheerfully,

'Yes, I must soon begin to go out. We must at once have the summer drawing-room opened. By the way, father, we met a Mr. Greenwood at Paris on our way out, and we have asked him to come here later on for some shooting; he was very kind to us.'

'Greenwood—Gaythorne Greenwood?'

Percival looked at his father. Had he heard the report?

'Yes.'

'I have met him in town or at the club, but I have never spoken to him. Did you make any other friends?'

'A few others; but Baveno was enough in itself. It is a lovely place.'

'Well, as I said before, it is a great mistake that you did not stay longer.'

'We thought you might want us,' Percival answered, smiling.

'What an idea! So you fancied yourself indispensable; that's the way of young people now-a-days. I have still a good deal of business to get through, so you won't get much of my company.'

Clara was wondering when she would be able to find an opportunity of talking to her father about Sara. She decided at last that it was better to wait till the occasion presented itself; it must soon arise.

Strangely enough, the occasion came

the very next afternoon, for at tea-time Mrs. Arbuthnot, one of their neighbours, was announced, just when Lord Stretton was in the drawing-room talking politics with Percival.

Mrs. Arbuthnot was a short, stout lady, who was very aristocratic, and who was looked upon in the county as a great authority on the subject of etiquette.

'Ah! my poor Clara; so you have come back. Well, my dear, you look decidedly better. You must try and cheer up a little. I suppose you will soon be returning all your calls?'

'I suppose so. Percival and my father would be dull if we saw nothing and nobody.'

'Of course, the male heart is not made of the same stuff as ours. It hates melancholia. I always say I know of

no sorrow that a man can't find a salve for.'

Clara looked at her visitor to see if she had any double meaning in her remark, but evidently it was merely a phrase taken at random from her select aphorisms.

'Papa will be very busy with his new fads about drainage. He says he has been spending his days at Sudwick to see whether the village can't be better provided with water. Every dry summer there is a water-famine there.'

'By the way, Clara, are you going to call at Chapel Stacey rectory?'

Clara was conscious of blushing.

'Oh, you mean call on the Beddoes? I have only just heard about them.'

'Quite a romance of gold. Of course you know that the mother was a Gwillian. The awkward part is that the Gwillians

have quite dropped out of society, but then the girl is a——'

Clara interposed.

'Of course I shall call. I'm going there very soon.'

'Yes, I was saying the same. We ought to be kind to the girl.'

Mrs. Arbuthnot's sons were famous for their extravagance, and there was a whisper that the eldest was not always sober. Clara felt amused at the plain course of Mrs. Arbuthnot's reasoning; evidently Percival's lady-love was a subject of talk.

'Have people called on them?' she asked innocently.

'Well, not many. We waited to let them settle down, but I hear that the gentlemen rave about the mother even more than about the daughter.

'But I conclude they will prefer to marry the daughter,' said Clara, sarcastically.

'My dear Clara, we must all live! Now, Lord Stretton, give us your opinion. We are talking of Mrs. Beddoes. Suppose you were a penniless younger son, and that you fell in love with the mother, but had a chance of marrying the Mine of Wealth, what would you do?'

Little as the speaker knew it she had made a very unfortunate remark. Percival turned away and looked out of the window, but Lord Stretton, on the contrary, did not seem to be at all disturbed by the question.

'I think that the ladies would decide between them which of them I was to marry, for you know that ladies decide everything in these days.' He laughed pleasantly.

'Except the disinterestedness of men! That is beyond our amending,' she answered.

The next afternoon Miss Osborne ordered the carriage early and went to call at Chapel Stacey rectory. She knew the place well, the absent rector being a distant cousin of her mother, but now suddenly it seemed to become invested with new interest. She would see Percival's lady-love, and, perhaps, she would find out from Mrs. Beddoes what objections there were to the marriage. She told Percival where she was going, and suggested to him that he should walk out to meet her. To this of course he readily agreed.

It so happened that Mrs. Beddoes was at home, because that morning Lord Stretton had written to her that he should walk over after tea, and that he hoped to meet her in the wood. He further said that he had important news for her. Lucy stayed in, and Sara, not being wanted to accompany her mother, wandered out upon the hills,

hoping to meet Herringham, who, up to this time, had studiously avoided her.

Lucy was sitting by the open window bending over her embroidery frame when Miss Osborne was announced. Much as she had prepared herself for all possible surprises, Mrs. Beddoes felt that she was colouring as she rose to shake hands with her visitor, looking her quickly over. She at once noticed that the girl before her appeared much older than her years, that she was perfectly self-possessed, that she was quick-tempered, and that she was certainly proud. All these things Lucy noted, but she was not disconcerted, for she felt that her own turn would come. She could well bear to be snubbed now, for unfortunately Clara had inherited a haughty manner which betrayed itself even when the girl really wished to be friendly with strangers.

A few common-place remarks were exchanged, and then Clara sat down close to the window, near to which stood the embroidery frame. Lucy also sat down, and her manner, though perfectly lady-like, was decidedly chilling. Suddenly Clara was startled by seeing a likeness in the face before her, and the recognition flashed across her mind.

'I think, Mrs. Beddoes, that you must know Mr. Colborne. I saw your likeness in his house, for lately I have been doing a little work in his parish.'

Clara remembered that the worthy vicar had called this woman a saint.

'It must be a good likeness if you recognise me by it,' said Lucy, smiling at her own thoughts.

'You were much praised by Mr. Colborne; that, I suppose, impressed the photograph on my mind.'

'I like visiting the poor,' said Lucy, quietly. 'It has been quite a solace in my life.'

'Is Miss Beddoes at home?'

Clara wanted to see her, and watched the mother's face closely for the answer; but then Lucy, on her side, knew that she was being watched.

'No, Sara has gone out. She likes taking long walks on the hills. Have you read this new book which everybody is talking about?'

'"Langholm Priory"? No, I will get it.'

There was another pause, and Clara felt that she was making no way.

'I hope that you and Miss Beddoes will come soon to Stacey. The gardens are quite perfect just now.'

'Thank you. I should like to see the gardens.'

The sound of carriage-wheels was heard. The permission to call on Mrs. Beddoes had been disseminated among the select, and there would now be no want of callers at the rectory.

Clara found herself, shortly afterwards, going down the drive, having found out nothing, except that Mrs. Beddoes was extremely pretty, and extremely difficult of approach. Clara did not like meeting her match, or rather much more than her match, in the person of a mere nobody.

She told the coachman to drive down the village, hoping to kill time and to catch a sight of Sara. She thought that she should know her by her auburn hair, and she decided that, if she met her, she would certainly speak to her and tell her that she was her friend.

Unfortunately, there was no Sara to be

seen, and, after a time, Clara gave orders to return home.

She felt disheartened by the failure of her mission. She had not in the least forwarded her brother's cause, and she had formed no opinion about Mrs. Beddoes, except the one, adopted without reason, that she did not like her. Mr. Colborne's judgment of her, however, still rang in her ears: 'She was a saint, and they are rare.' Half-way home she saw Percival on the road, coming to meet her.

'Well,' he said, directly he was seated by her side, 'well, have you seen her? What do you think of her? What did she say?'

'If you mean Miss Beddoes, Percy, I never saw her. Her mother was in, but my visit was short, for Mrs. Arbuthnot came soon after me.'

'She said nothing about Sara?'

'Nothing, except that she was gone out for a walk;' and Clara laughed, though she added, 'but how pretty she is! I never saw a woman whose every movement is so graceful, and I think that when one looks at her one realizes the meaning of the poetry of motion.'

Percival was silent for a moment.

'I can't make it out. I think that Mrs. Beddoes has some strong reason against her daughter's having anything to do with me. I wish I knew the cause.'

'Well, she will return the call, and perhaps she will bring your Sara with her.'

'Not at all likely. I think this opposition on my father's side is very extraordinary, for when I first spoke to him he seemed quite glad about it.'

'Poor old Percy! I will talk to father to-day.'

'It will be useless,' answered Percival; and then he relapsed into silence.

He longed to get away from home, to plunge into some active work so as to forget his present anxiety; but here he must stay, bound by that dreadful promise. How was he to be released? what was he to do next? How could he have been such a fool as to promise, and yet, at the time, what else, he asked himself, could he have done?

The gardens at Stacey Hall were famed for their beauty, a beauty for which nature and not art had to be praised. Now that the weather was so warm and beautiful, the three often wandered out after dinner to saunter on the terrace.

'Papa,' said Clara, joining her father as he was lighting his cigar,—'Papa, I want to speak to you; may I?'

Lord Stretton sat down on a garden-

seat, and crossed his legs. Clara, looking at her father, thought,

'How handsome he is! I wonder if—if——'

'Well, my dear, what is it?'

'It's about Percival. Is it fair to let him waste his time here, and yet to prevent him from making what people would call a good marriage?'

Lord Stretton had expected this reproach, and he had prepared his answer.

'I don't wish him to waste his time. He made a great mistake about Oxford, and really I'm not answerable for it. If he would travel he would get that girl out of his head.'

'But why should he? She is such a nice girl, people say, and they do care about each other.'

'A mere fancy; but really, Clara, you

are rather unjust to me. Mrs. Beddoes will not hear of it, what can I do?'

'Then the opposition comes from her, not from you?'

'Oh, well, from both of us. It's a pity Percival should get the credit of running after an heiress.'

'You know that it is not that. Papa, at all events, let them meet. She doesn't know we are here.'

'No, Clara, once for all, it is impossible. I don't think this marriage would be for Percival's happiness, and, besides, if I gave leave to-morrow, why, there's the other side. I have spoken to Mrs. Beddoes, and—and, well, it's impossible.'

'Then I shall advise Percival to take the law into his own hands.'

'Not whilst he lives under my roof,' said Lord Stretton, hastily.

He felt dreadfully irritated by the awkwardness of his position and Clara's persistency.

'You are very unjust to Percy. He has never given you any trouble, and just think of the scrapes some of our neighbours' eldest sons get into.'

Lord Stretton's conscience was still tender, he hated himself, but what could he do? The usual result of a man's dilemma followed—he lost, or pretended to lose, his temper.

'I won't have this subject mentioned again, Clara. I suppose that I have a right to make my own decisions, and that it is scarcely your place to argue them out with me. Percival can leave any moment that he chooses, if he so little cares for my opinion.'

'Opinion! Your injustice!' said Clara, hotly. 'Why should you ruin his life for no reason whatever, or, if you have

one, why do you not tell it to him?'

Clara did not wait to hear the answer. She knew that she was wrong to speak in this manner to her father, but she was angry for her brother's sake. How would it end, and what was all this senseless mystery about?

'He ruined mother's life,' said the impetuous Clara, 'and now he means to tyrannize over us! It is unjust, unfair.'

Nothing is more unpleasant to witness than a small family divided against itself. Happily for this household visitors began to flock back to their old haunts, anxious to see how Clara could perform the duties of mistress and hostess. Most of the callers mentioned the Beddoes in their conversation, so that the brother and sister found it very trying to appear quite unconcerned. Another annoyance was, that the elder ladies and the men-folk all

implied, by the tone of their remarks, that they were surprised at Percival's idleness. They made innuendoes about the danger of having nothing to do, but Clara always hotly defended idleness in the abstract, knowing that she would share the blame. Like the Indian judge, she constantly asked herself, 'Who is she?' for this mysterious, unknown woman who might come was the cause of all this trouble and of all this disturbance.

In a very short time Clara had the satisfaction of seeing Mrs. Beddoes drive up to the front door. Miss Osborne was cutting off dead roses from a creeper climbing over the garden steps, so through a low garden gate she was able to notice that her visitor had come alone. She did not hurry herself to come in, and indeed she took time to consider whether she should say anything about Percival to the

widow. Instinctively she began to hate her, and Clara's dislike was no feeble feeling.

On her side, as Lucy drove up to the beautiful Elizabethan mansion, her eyes noted many things. She was outwardly very calm, she wanted to take in as much as possible, and she wished to make better plans, for lately these plans had become sadly entangled, and she felt it was time to take a decided step. Douglas was extremely difficult to deal with. He found decision a quality hard to acquire, especially when that decision required him to do something to which his nature was averse.

Lucy had taken great pains to dress herself, so as to show off her beauty to advantage. She wished to enter Stacey Hall feeling that she was in truth already its mistress. She would much have pre-

ferred only stepping over its threshold when she was truly and legally Lady Stretton, but this was impossible, so she made the best of the present situation.

When she heard that Miss Osborne was at home, she heaved a little sigh of relief. She wished especially to see her, for she wanted to show this girl, of whose opposition Douglas had already told her, that she was indeed of no consideration in the matter. She would like to have told her too that very soon she would no longer be mistress of this home of her childhood, that, had right been done long ago, Clara would not have existed, and that in Lucy's mind she ought to be swept out of remembrance.

She stepped down from the carriage very deliberately. The soft, black, crape-like material fell in exquisite folds about her. The small black bonnet lightened with

shining jet brought out the fair softness of the curling hair. Everything that dress can do to add charm to a woman, Lucy had done. The very footman looked after her impressed by some unusual beauty about this visitor. As she followed the man-servant through the hall and through a with-drawing-room, Lucy's eyes glanced quickly at everything within sight. Lady Stretton's taste had been of a high order. Everything about the rooms was in keeping, and the artistic furniture delighted Lucy's keen sense of the beautiful. Several of the French windows were left open in the drawing-room, and these let in the afternoon sun and a sweet smell of white jessamine. All conspired to lull the senses into passive enjoyment, for the furniture, the books, and the pictures were all in perfect keeping. They showed that long descent had not left culture behind, and Lucy,

going to the open window when the man-servant had left her, looked all round the large room and immediately realised that at last she was in a home which entirely satisfied her æsthetic sense. Some of the pictures on the wall were very valuable. The grand piano in one corner was a work of art, inlaid with beautiful wood and adorned with paintings. The great chimney-piece was a marvel of stone carving, and above it, reaching to the ceiling, was some oak panelling, richly carved with the quarterings of the family, encircled by wreaths of fruit and flowers.

As Lucy slowly took in all this her lips were firmly pressed together and she thought, 'This is my rightful home, not Sara's. No, she shall never supplant me in this, never. If only I had kept her with me she would never have seen young Osborne, but who could guess that that

would happen? 'Douglas, Douglas, why, why were you ever false to me—why?'

The answer to her question was the sound of decided footsteps and the almost brusque entrance of Clara Osborne, the daughter of her rival.

CHAPTER X.

A BED OF ROSES.

'I AM sorry that I have brought you in,' said Lucy in her gentlest voice, which reminded one of the soft cooing of a dove on its perch.

Clara was a lady both by birth and education, and she could not be rude in her own house; but, without fully understanding the reason, she instinctively felt a dislike for this beautiful woman, though of course she did not show it. Still her manner was not cordial, this chill civility being

the only form of impertinence which people of good breeding countenance. Lucy was instantly aware of it, and naturally she knew the reason, for Lord Stretton had already told her of Clara's outburst, not with the wish to make mischief, but with the praiseworthy desire to show Lucy that she had better give in.

'One can never be sure of ten minutes to one's self on a fine day,' Clara remarked. 'I suppose Miss Beddoes did not wish to take a long drive this afternoon?'

'It is a long drive,' said Lucy, not noticing the rest of Clara's sentence.

'I am sorry, for I wanted to see her.'

'It is very kind of you.'

'Oh, no, not at all, it was for my brother's sake, but on the other hand I am glad for that reason that you came alone.' Clara sat down resolutely determined to have it out with this hard-hearted widow.

Lucy laughed softly.

'I see that you are young enough to encourage romance,' she said; but even Lucy could not prevent a slight accent of scorn from being audible in her words.

'Yes, I am. I spoke to my father about it the other day, and he told me that it was your doing, Mrs. Beddoes. It is very hard on—on both of them.'

'In such cases it is wiser to leave girls to the wisdom of their mothers,' Lucy answered, coldly; but Clara was brave, and she would not yet give in.

'But there is no reason against their being engaged. My brother fell in love before Miss Beddoes became rich.'

'Did he?' said Lucy, softly and intensely sarcastically.

Clara blushed scarlet.

'Certainly he did. Miss Beddoes knows it.'

'Sara has always been a good daughter. I am sure that she will never go against my wishes. Do you think, Miss Osborne, that—that you could make your brother understand that?'

'No, I shall certainly not try to do so. Forgive my being straightforward; the Osbornes always are.'

'I have heard cases of the contrary,' said Lucy, softly.

Clara felt incensed; she looked straight at her visitor's face, and she saw there a gleam of strange passion expressed by a look of cold contempt. Strangely enough, Mr. Colborne's words flashed into her mind, and she thought,

'Why, of course he was taken in, foolish man! This woman is not a saint, and I dislike her intensely. Poor Percival! Oh, he must give up her daughter—he

must; I could not bear to see her here often!'

The worst of it was that Clara felt powerless in her anger as she remarked,

'I see that you will never consent.'

'Never. It is kinder to be firm.'

'Then I hope they will marry without anyone's consent. I suppose that when a girl is of age she may do as she likes.'

'I daresay you would take the law into your own hands, Miss Osborne, because you have no mother; but—Sara is, in fact, different.'

Again Clara flushed with suppressed anger.

'I suppose that it is you who have persuaded papa to—to——'

At this moment Lord Stretton himself entered. He had not known that his Lucy was coming this afternoon; indeed, he had thought of riding over to her in the cool of

the evening, and then suddenly, to his inexpressible joy, he found himself face to face with her. Clara was looking at him, so he tried to appear natural, though not quite with success. Lucy alone remained calm and self-possessed.

'I am very glad to see you here,' said Lord Stretton, giving utterance to the first feeling of his heart.

Clara remained speechless. Never before had she seen her father so cordial to an utter stranger.

'It is very good of you to say so, when I am afraid that I have been making Miss Osborne angry; she was very kindly pleading for the romance of——'

'Clara angry! I hope not. She understands nothing about it at all. I quite agree with you, Mrs. Beddoes.'

'Because you see my difficulties. Yes, you were most kind, most generous.'

'In any case, Clara should have remembered that you are our visitor,' added Lord Stretton, feeling safe under Lucy's care. 'You have never seen the garden —won't you come out for a few moments, Mrs. Beddoes?'

'Thank you, I have very little time. I am expecting a visitor this evening.'

'Indeed!'

'Only a lawyer. Mr. Profitt asked to come down and see me.'

'Ah, yes, but you might take one turn. Clara, won't you put on your hat?'

Lord Stretton thought himself very diplomatic in making this suggestion, though he was longing to have Lucy to himself for a few precious moments, but Clara was too angry to dream of laying herself out for the widow's pleasure.

'Very well, but don't let me keep Mrs.

Beddoes waiting, I will join you in the garden.'

In another moment the two were left alone, and Lord Stretton came and stood close to Lucy. He was feeling that this was indeed a memorable date, there would be only one other of more importance, that was when Lucy should come here as the mistress of all she saw around her. As for Lucy she was plunged in deep thought. Her triumph would never be perfect if Clara, that proud, headstrong Clara, were to live under the same roof, neither would it be perfect if she were driven away from it by her own daughter.

'Dearest,' said her lover, 'you look beautiful to-day. Will you come into the garden? you and the flowers are perfect. How glad I am that I was at home. I was going to ride over this evening; but I hate

all this secrecy; when can I tell them?'

Lucy stood up and raised her eyes to his, then her lips parted into a smile. She was at Stacey Hall and the master of it was her slave; why had all these years of her life been wasted? Why was Clara mistress here now?

'Douglas, when—when I come I shall want you to myself.'

'Of course, my Lucy. We shall want each other. Each day it seems harder to live without you. How these last weeks seem to have flown.'

'Do they? Not for me. When I come, what will your daughter do?'

'Do?—Clara! Oh, of course it will be a little hard on her at first, but she will soon fall into your ways. She has never been used to rule here, and now her reign will, I hope, be short.'

'But she must not stay here, Douglas.

I should be miserable. Her face would—in fact, we should never be happy together.'

'Not stay here! But surely, Lucy, you would not wish me to turn out my children. A girl, too! Of course, Percival won't wish to stay, but as to Clara—this is her home. You mustn't mind her present annoyance. She has taken her brother's part. One can understand that, it is quite natural.'

Lucy gave a hasty glance round the room, and then she looked through the window. They were alone, quite alone. Only the birds were singing in the garden, and the butterflies were hovering over the flower-beds. She came close to him, and he was conscious of the irresistible power she possessed over him. In his early courting days he had not had this feeling. She put her small gloved hand in

his arm, and her soft cheek touched his shoulder.

'Douglas dear, you have so much to make up for—oh, so much.'

'I promise you, love, that you shall never have one wish which shall not be gratified if, that is, it is in my power to gratify it, but this one is—is—childish. You shall be mistress here, it will be your right, and I shall see that you are not mistress only in name; but Clara has no home but this, and she could not easily make new friends.'

'She will have money, Douglas; there will be no injury to her: she will not even want to live here—she must not live here. I want—I want to be happy at last.'

Lord Stretton stooped a little, and kissed her soft hair.

'My darling, you shall be happy.'

'You will tell her—that—you want me all to yourself?'

His answer was prevented by the sound of footsteps. It was only a gardener coming to nail up a broken rose-tree, but Lord Stretton hastily led the way out. There was a long gravel-walk leading to a sundial, and on each side were beds of glowing red geraniums. Beyond, there were some lawns shaded by cedar-trees, and in quaint corners were small plantations of rare shrubs and mazes of wild flowers. Everything had been done with a view to beauty. To Lord Stretton it now appeared far more beautiful than it had ever done before, because Lucy was walking there. As for Lucy, she looked like a queen ready to rule over all this fair domain, and willing to rule its master, who at this moment asked for nothing better than to be

under the sway of this beautiful woman. They wandered happily round for some time, then turned towards the great rose plantation; and here Lord Stretton explained the vagaries of various rose-trees, till all at once he reached a small bed of choice roses, known by the name of 'Clara's bed.'

'This is Clara's own property. She grafted all of them herself. Look at her "Boule de neige." She calls it "Percival's quest." Roses are his hobby, or they used to be.'

Mrs. Beddoes answered nothing, and Lord Stretton recollected himself.

'Indeed, Lucy, you will learn to love the children; Percival especially has a very lovable nature. Everyone on the estate is devoted to him.'

At this moment Clara appeared, slowly sauntering down the long walk. She

walked like one who knows that she is mistress of a place. Her very manner seemed to intimate that her present anxiety was to get rid of Mrs. Beddoes.

'Papa is always so foolishly polite,' she said to herself, 'and I can see that this horrid person likes to potter round with him. She may be beautiful, and certainly she walks like a queen, but I can't bear to think of being connected with her. I am almost glad she won't listen to Percy's wishes. Poor fellow! He is madly in love, all the same, with her daughter, but if she is like the mother——!'

When Clara came up to her father she saw, to her horror, that he had picked the choicest roses from her bed for Mrs. Beddoes.

'He wants to propitiate her,' she thought. 'It is for Percy's sake, but he might have left my special roses alone.'

Lucy held in her hand the exquisite bouquet of roses, now and then putting them to her face. Her blush of pleasure was no insult to the blush roses, the flowers seemed a fitting frame for her fair face. If Clara thought herself magnanimous for even the small show of politeness she extended to this unwelcome guest, she soon found that her generosity was not appreciated. As she came up to the pair, Mrs. Beddoes did not even favour her with a society smile, indeed she barely noticed her approach, for Lord Stretton was speaking.

'Roses are also your favourite flowers, I see.'

'Yes, indeed, I love them. I have a bowl filled with them every morning at the rectory; but they cannot compare with yours.'

'We must manage to send you some.

Packed in a tin box, roses travel very well.'

'They are going over,' said Clara, coldly. 'I fear we should never be able to fill a box for Mrs. Beddoes.' But Lord Stretton could not bear to hear Lucy's wishes thwarted.

'But there are more in the kitchen-garden. Have you time to come round there?'

'Not to-day,' said Mrs. Beddoes, lifting her eyes towards Clara's face; and the look said, 'But another day I shall come and go over all the place,' and Clara's answering look said, 'No, you shall not come again.'

It was a woman's battle fought without words, but it was none the less fierce for that. As Lucy walked back towards the house with a soft, easy motion as she trod the velvet-like green sward, no one,

with a sense of beauty, could deny that this woman possessed by nature the poetry of motion, a poetry so subtle, so rare, that those most fascinated by it are sometimes ignorant what it is in the owner of it which fills them with admiration. Lord Stretton, accustomed to Clara's quick, determined movements, in which lurked no suspicion of poetry, could not take his eyes off his Lucy. He felt irritated by Clara's evident unfriendliness, and when Mrs. Beddoes had been helped into her carriage, the large bunch of exquisite roses resting in her lap, and she had driven away giving him one smile which seemed to him to be a smile from heaven, he turned towards Clara, and said, with evident annoyance in his tone,

'Whatever you may feel, Clara, you should at least try to show politeness to guests who come to my house.'

Never before in his life had he made such a remark, and Clara, lifting her head, proudly knitted her brows as she answered,

'Mrs. Beddoes is an odious woman, and I am not going to encourage her visits —as you have done.'

Lord Stretton was angry, but also the weight of Lucy's words hung heavily upon his conscience.

'As long as I am master here, Clara, my guests shall be treated with courtesy.'

'Mother would never have allowed her to come here,' answered Clara, forgetting everything in her anger, and trying to touch a sore place.

She did not expect the look which her father gave her, nor the decided silence which followed it as he left her. All at once Clara, feeling dazed with the

agitation of anger, mechanically repeated her words,

'Mother would never have allowed her to come here.—No,' she said, fiercely, to herself, cutting off the dead blossoms of a near climbing rose, 'no, no, that is impossible. Father never knew her except through Percival, but—— It is ridiculous, she only poses as a *nouveau riche*. Of all the hateful women this sort of arrogant, would-be *grande dame* is the worst! Poor Percival, if only he could see it, he is really well out of it all!'

CHAPTER XI.

A PEEP IN THE WOOD.

On that beautiful afternoon Sara was not asked to accompany her mother, indeed she never even knew that she was going to call at Stacey Hall, neither had she been told of Miss Osborne's visit. Feeling very sad and lonely, she much preferred a solitary walk, so that when her mother suggested her going to take some frocks which she had been making for the family of a poor woman living in a solitary cottage on the top of the Highmynd, Sara gladly assented. How good her mother

was to have thought of these children who lived far from school, and whose mother, unable to read and write, had round her a group of five little ones, all living in the same primitive ignorance; for the father was a carpenter, and was away at work all the week.

When her mother drove off, Sara went down to the village, hoping to catch sight of Herringham, for as yet he had never come near to her. Not seeing him, she stole into the old church, and sat looking at the sun shining through painted glories of coloured saints. There was still sunshine in the world, though it had left off shining upon her life. It seemed so strange that, though for her outwardly all was prosperity, in reality a gloom had settled down upon her. Sara's religion was that of a loving child, trustful and believing. God had always seemed very

near to her, and she had never doubted in His goodness nor in that of those about her. But now she was gradually awaking to that most terrible of all human knowledge, that some one we love is not as perfect as we fancied them to be, her precious enamelled jewel was losing its beauty. The more she thought it over the more she felt certain that Gaythorne Greenwood had been urged on by her mother to pay court to her. To Sara this seemed merely a needless cruelty. Her mother must know that love once given was sacred, but when she reached this thought the girl rebelled against her own conclusions.

'It is impossible; mother does not understand that we do love each other. To her it must seem so sudden that she cannot realize it. She is so beautiful, so good; but her own life has been so sad, that it will take time for her to understand

sunshine. She married without love, and that was a great wrong, and yet she wishes me to do the same. But no, it cannot be that!'

Sara rose from her knees, feeling that the holy place had breathed holy thoughts into her mind. She determined that she would resist the idea that she was unloved, it was impossible, and it could not be true. Then she passed out of the building, and turned into the valley road that wound round the feet of the mountain spurs, accompanied by the music of the brook. The path crossed and recrossed the stream, sometimes rounding mountain pools, sometimes edging miniature precipices, sometimes mounting miniature hills, but always ascending higher and higher with the stream to join the high level. Now and then a few tourists crossed her path, among them a lover and his lass, scorning shy-

ness, loth to part even in order to make room for her solitude; and once a little girl ran past her accompanied by her governess, both looking as if they fully appreciated this draught of liberty.

'To all appearance,' thought Sara, 'I am free, free to come and go, free to love and to be loved, and yet it is all only in appearance.'

So life's mystery wove its fine, nameless threads about her, and made her lift her eyes to the hill-tops, feeling that only from above could come her help in this season of necessity.

By the time that she had reached the summit of the Highmynd she felt weary, a very unusual thing for her; but as she neared the cottage she saw the children playing strange and delightful games with old sardine-boxes and bits of broken ginger-beer bottles. These useless nothings filled

up the measure of their happiness, and the humour of this made her wonder if, in the sight of a higher Power, such poor playthings as love and riches, valued by elder children, appeared equally worthless.

'Well, Tom,' she said, taking the grimy little hand in hers, 'where's mother, and would you like to see something I've brought for you and your sisters?'

Tom hung his head like a culprit; for him language centred more easily round the sardine-box than round a beautiful lady, but Maria was not at all shy, and answered for him,

'I've got a new dress, and it's got a buss'l, but Mary's dress ain't got one at all.'

This reminder of her sorrow caused Mary to wipe her eyes vigorously, though no tears were visible.

'I ain't got a buss'l, but mother prom-

ised me one next time I has a new dress.'

'I've got tuppince,' said Tom, not wishing to be left in the cold, 'a gennelman give it me, and he's in talking to mother.'

'Then I'll leave the parcel with Maria,' said Sara, thinking she would not disturb Mrs. Smith; but at that moment the cottage door opened, and Percival stood on the threshold. He was still talking to Mrs. Smith, and did not notice Sara, so that for one moment all the girl's happiness seemed bound up in this minute of exquisite silence. Her sad thoughts fled like startled rabbits, and only the endless song of love which nature lives to sing was audible.

Suddenly he turned, and their eyes met, but the moment was too sweet for words; indeed, Sara was in duty bound to address Mrs. Smith, and to deliver her mother's parcel.

'Oh, Mrs. Smith, my mother, Mrs. Beddoes, who has taken the rectory, has been making some frocks for your little girls. She heard that you would be glad of them, and here's some toys and some picture-books for Tom and his sisters.'

'I'm very much obliged, miss, I'm sure, it's a hard matter to get along. What with the children's clothes and the food and the master's not having much work just now, I'm very grateful for a little help.'

'Perhaps they can learn their letters out of the books I have brought,' she said, smiling.

'Won't you come in, miss. I'm no scholard, but——'

'Let me walk home with you, Miss Beddoes,' interposed Percival aloud, fearful that Sara did not mean to give him that right which chance had bestowed upon them.

'Thank you. I will come, but our ways don't lie together,' she said, only her smile belied her words.

They walked along in silence, and then, when out of hearing, with nothing near them except miles of lonely solitude, Percival took her hand and his tongue was loosed.

'Sara, my darling, this is a blessed chance.'

'I did not know that you were at home, I thought you were in Italy,' she said, under her breath.

'I couldn't stay away. I dreamt one night you wanted me.'

'You dreamt that I wanted you! Oh, Percival, I do, I do! I am so lonely, and mother wants me to marry Mr. Greenwood. Don't leave me—what shall I do?'

The loneliness that she had gone through made her say much which she had not

meant to say. Percival took her hand, and clasped it on his arm. With these two there was nothing to hide, no past to forgive and forget, only the miserable present to get through somehow. Sara suddenly felt how foolish she had been to doubt her Percival.

'If we could think of ourselves we would go away, far away, and let our friends settle all their differences alone; but one can't give up one's duty even for—the dearest thing on earth.'

'No, no, I know it, I shouldn't like you to do it for me, dear, dear Percival. I do trust you, only I can't understand it all. All my life long I have never had a fear, and now—I am getting quite nervous and silly. That rectory is a horrible place, it is so melancholy, and yet how close it lies to all this loveliness! Tell me, Percival—but there is so much I want to know.'

She turned off the road into one of the smaller valleys which led across country to another path. They were alone, and the beauty of the place filled them with happiness in spite of all the uncertainty and in spite of Sara's strange words.

Percival answered: 'I wish I could explain! I think I owe you the true explanation, because already some things that I have done must seem odd to you, but you know if it only depended on me, then——'

'I know; yes, I trust you entirely, only when one is left alone, quite alone without one word, one line, it is then that strange doubts enter into one's stupid head. Now I shall never doubt or be afraid again. Oh, I shall be quite happy, and I shall wait with exemplary patience.'

A flight of blackcocks flew past them, uttering their strange cry. Sara started, and then laughed.

'I do believe that I am nervous! I never had nerves before. It's ridiculous!'

'You look ill and worried, my sweet one. Listen, Sara. I am sure you know, from common report, that my father and mother lived a miserable life together for years—indeed, I never remember the real brightness of a home surrounded with love. Of course I soon went to school, then to college, and life opened out for me. I put away disagreeable thoughts. Then came our first meeting. It was chance, but I fell in love with you that first evening. You seemed to me to be the perfection of womanhood. From that moment life was indeed worth living. I meant to distinguish myself for your sake. I meant to carve out a fine destiny, so as to offer it to you, when suddenly it was all altered by my mother's death.'

'I know, and your goodness to your

father. I thought you mistaken, dear Percival, but——'

'Because you never knew the truth. On her death-bed, my mother made me promise that I would not leave my father, because she said that if I did there was a woman who would get hold of him, a woman she dreaded, and whose presence in her house she could not bear to think of. I feel sure that there was something besides mere jealousy in her words. Even then I hesitated to give such a promise, but I was her son, her only son, and she loved me. What could I do? I gave it. I thought anyhow, if we both stayed at home, father could not be got hold of by this woman, whoever she may be, so I gave up my dearest ambition, and you know the rest. I can only say that but for you, my darling, life would have been unbearable. I believed that if I could

win you and bring you home to Stacey, then we could make my father's life happy and that no one would get hold of him; but you know that the obstacles have not been from my side. Your mother——'

'Your father, Percival——'

'My father is certainly very much opposed to our engagement, but he was not at first against it; it was only after he had seen your mother that——'

'Mother feared that I should not be welcomed by him, and she believes——'

'Anyhow, both are against us. We might laugh at all restrictions, but, darling, it is best to be open. How can I break my promise to my dead mother? I have bitterly repented making it, but——'

'I see, of course you cannot. I would not have you do it for me; but oh! Percival, your father may live for years, and suppose he should always hold out?'

'No, he cannot. When you are of age we will be a law unto ourselves; besides, I cannot be bound all my life! Oh, if only mother had been more explicit, if she had told me something more—but just then it seemed so terrible that I did not even wish to know more. Now I would give worlds to be told that woman's name.'

'No, no, don't wish it; I am going to be happy. I will not fret any more, and I will be patient. Percival, you will be always, always the same—you will trust me, won't you? and I will trust you.'

'Always, darling, always.'

'Love is so wonderful. I mean, love like ours. It makes one feel strong to bear everything, doesn't it?'

'Except separation, entire separation.'

'Oh, even that will be easier now. I will try and make mother's life happier. Somehow we have drifted apart lately. It

is my fault, I would think of nothing but you. I was longing for you, wondering each minute of the day what you were doing, and perhaps I was impatient, but—Oh! it must be my fault.'

'I want to tell you that even Clara is now on our side. She has been so good and kind to me. She will welcome you and will love you, I know she will. But, tell me, have you heard from your guardian?'

'No, but Mr. Profitt is coming to-day on some legal business or other; he may know. Guardian has not the pen of a ready writer, but he was only going to stay a day or two out there before returning. I want him because he liked you.'

'He showed very good taste, I think.'

Then they laughed, and again they discussed the past, the present, and the

future, and life seemed an idyl to them because of their own innocence and of their own oneness of joy.

The walk was long, but it was all too short for them. When they reached a turn in the valley, Sara stopped short.

'If we go this way, Percival, we can shorten our road by coming down on our own wood. It is a little steep, but you can help me.'

Percival threw prudence to the winds, though he did say,

'We might meet your mother!'

'Oh, no. She is gone for a drive; besides, she nearly always walks in the wood in the morning. I think I must tell you, I know it will be safe with you. You know how pretty mother is, and how often she looks younger than I do; well, I believe, no, I am sure, that she too has a lover!'

'Your mother, Sara!'

'Yes.—Don't be so surprised, sir. Pray, are you surprised at my having a lover?'

'But she is your mother.'

'She married at eighteen, and—— Oh, I am not surprised at all, only I wish that she would confide in me and let me wish her joy. She has not said one word about it. I don't know if he is a stranger, or some one living near here. I know nothing.'

'How strange! Then how is it that you do know anything?'

'Why, one day when I should have been having a lesson I ran out into the wood to—to—well, to think of you. I was surprised to see mother walking with a man.'

'But why a lover?'

'Why! Oh, one knows! I couldn't

see his face, but the way he bent down towards her, and the way——'

'Sara! but surely you can guess who it is? He can't have come down from the clouds!'

'It's strange, but true, that I have not the remotest idea who he may be. Somehow I feel sure that they often meet, but I dare not ask her! She—she—is reserved. Oh, Percival, if she could be happy that would indeed be perfect!'

Percival pondered some little time about this news, then he turned to another subject more interesting, namely, Sara herself, and they walked on feeling that they would soon have to say good-bye, for the evening shadows were lengthening and it was getting late.

At last their long walk came nearly to an end when they reached the gate leading into the wood.

'It will be locked, I fear,' said Sara, 'but we can get over it, perhaps. The path through the wood takes us home much sooner than the path which goes round the hill.'

With a little difficulty they succeeded in getting over the hedge, and then Sara hurried on more quickly.

'I am very late, mother will wonder where I am, but I don't mind! Oh, Percival, this walk has made all the difference in the world to me.'

'And to me too, darling. We need mind nothing now.'

'Nothing,' echoed Sara, 'and next year this will seem quite trivial, won't it?'

'Yes, quite trivial. But look, Sara, we are not the only people here. Who are those two?'

Sara looked in the direction Percival in-

dicated, and then she drew back, smiling and blushing.

'Oh, Percival, it is mother and the man I told you of! Look through here. You will see them passing up the wood. How fortunate for us that they are not on this path. It is the same man I saw. He has such a good figure.'

Percival cast a glance in the direction indicated, then he drew back and hurried on, taking Sara by the arm.

'Come,' he said, quickly. 'We are not meant to see——'

He appeared strangely agitated.

'Is there any harm?' asked Sara, 'was it dishonourable? Only I do want to know and to wish mother joy.'

'She does not want you to know, I am sure. Don't try to find out. Good-bye, my dearest, I must go. Clara will think that I am lost.'

'Good-bye, dear Percival. When shall we meet again? Don't look so sad. I shan't mind, I shall wait. I shall be patient.'

They parted hastily, and Sara, as she walked to the rectory, mourned a little because of the old reason that true happiness comes so soon to an end.

CHAPTER XII.

DISCOVERED.

Percival walked quickly down the village street till he came to the New Hotel. A trap was standing at the door, having just brought a traveller's luggage from the station. Without a moment's delay the young man was able to jump in, telling the driver to go to Stacey Hall. During the drive he never spoke a word, much to Jimmy Johns' surprise, for 'young Mr. Osborne' was a favourite with all the Chapel Stacey people, and had usually plenty to say to them. Percival's mind

was in a strange state of surprise, of sorrow, and of indignation. He was thankful that he had so far controlled himself that Sara had no idea of the shock which he had experienced. He had recognized his father in the man whom Sara had pointed out as her mother's lover. At first Percival had refused to believe his eyes, but a second glance assured him that there was, and that there could be no possible doubt about the fact. At once too his mind was vividly conscious of the fact that it was through him that his father had seen Mrs. Beddoes. But was she the woman his mother had warned him against, or was this some new and sudden gallantry which meant nothing serious? The more he thought of it, however, the more he felt sure that Mrs. Beddoes *was* the woman, and that, through some strange fatality, he had

himself helped on what he had promised should not happen.

What was to be done? It was possible, more than probable, that in the old days his father had met Miss Gwillian at the Walesbury Ball, just as he had met her daughter there. How strange that the idea had never occurred to him! Then he recollected how at first sight he had disliked Sara's mother. Was it that some powerful instinct warned him against her? But that he should have ruined his prospects, given up Oxford, and tied himself down to Stacey, merely to help on what he fancied he was preventing, was galling in the extreme. But, he repeated, what was he now to do? He remembered his mother's face, her determination, even on her death-bed, to prevent this thing happening making him certain that she must have had powerful reasons for her hatred.

Then too he could now see what had brought about the strange change in his father, and the unmeaning ban that had been put against his own marriage. It was a conspiracy, and poor Sara was to be the victim.

Percival's indignation rose higher the more he thought of it. His father must have kept all this very secret, and whilst Percival and Clara were in Italy there had been ample opportunity for Mrs. Beddoes to further her own ends. Why had he left his father? Had he stayed at home, he must surely have discovered that something was happening, and then he would have prevented it at any cost. But again he reasoned, What right had he to thwart his father's inclination? He knew too well how little domestic happiness had been his lot; still for a man with children to marry again, and to turn his only

daughter into a mere lodger, was a hard thing.

Jimmy Johns drove well, the horse was good, and the ten miles did not seem long to Percival, for all the time he had been trying to solve his difficulties, turning them over in every conceivable manner. It was half-past seven when he reached home, and, quickly dismissing his driver, he ran up to Clara's room, sure of finding her dressing for dinner.

'Clara,' he called, 'Clara, where are you?'

Clara came out of her room ready dressed.

'I find papa has put off dinner,' she said, 'till eight o'clock. He said he had some special business which would detain him. Where have you been?'

'Come into the morning-room, I want to talk to you.'

'Oh, Percival, I have been made so angry to-day. That horrid Mrs. Beddoes came quite early in the afternoon. Well, of course she is beautiful, but I think she has a horrid expression. She was quite rude to me, but actually like sugar to papa, and he was so easily taken in that he cut all the best roses for her!'

Clara laughed now at her own vehemence. Her words sent another chill into Percival's heart.

'How strange you should say that, because—— Oh, Clara—she is—I mean, Mrs. Beddoes is the woman we were to guard against, and—and—I have helped it on. What am I to do?'

Clara looked too much surprised for words. Then she gasped,

'How do you know? It can't be true! Mrs. Beddoes!'

'I have seen them together, and Sara told me.'

'Does she know—have you seen her?'

'Sara has never seen father, so she did not know him; but she knew that he was her mother's lover, though she only saw him in the wood, and she has never met him face to face.'

'It seems impossible! How have they met? If it is true, why, Percy, she will have no pity; she has no heart. Oh! her eyes are so cold, so—so pitiless. We must take father away. You must give up Sara. Don't let's have any connection with that woman; no, you must not.'

'Give up Sara! Clara, that is impossible!'

'Remember mother's words. For her sake you must, indeed you must, Percy.'

'Give up Sara! She is a saint; she knows nothing of all this.'

'People say Mrs. Beddoes is a saint; Mr. Colborne thought so, and yet I am sure that she is a bad woman. We must save father.'

'Save him; but how?'

'You must break off all intercourse with the family. Get away from them and their horrid money. I felt a loathing of it all when she was here. Oh, if I had but guessed!'

'Hush, Clara, you must not be so fierce. We must be calm. After all, we are his children, and father is master here.'

'Yes, but men are so stupid. They are so easily taken in by a pretty face!'

'I can't see my way at all clearly. Why did I promise? it was a cruel request.'

'No, no, mother must have known. She had a hasty temper, she could not help it, but she was really good, really great,

and she did care about father. She wished to save him from this person. It was noble of her.'

'But did she think of me?'

'Yes, I am sure she did! She couldn't know of course about Sara, but she knew that if we became connected with—that woman, we should suffer.'

Percival had to go and dress for dinner, and all the usual routine and ceremony of Stacey Hall had to be respected. When the three met in the drawing-room, Lord Stretton was very cheerful, and especially kind to Clara. It was as if their late difference had entirely escaped his memory.

'Really, it has been a lovely evening! Sultan went beautifully. I wouldn't sell him for any money,' remarked Lord Stretton.

'Where did you go?' asked Clara, rais-

ing her head, and the pride of her mother's race in her tone.

'I went to Chapel Stacey. There's a man there staying at the hotel, who wants to buy the land on the opposite side of the valley, so as to build a boarding-house. I told him that my father had long ago entirely refused to sell for such a purpose.'

'I hope you won't consent. It's dreadful to turn a lovely place into a cockney's resort,' said Clara.

Dinner was announced, and they were surrounded with servants. Conversation was then forced to be quite general. Clara longed to talk about Mrs. Beddoes, but even when they were left alone, she found her tongue tied. Politics filled up the gaps, and after dinner Lord Stretton went to smoke his cigar on the terrace, and then came in to read the *Times*.

'Clara, can't you play something?' he said, as he turned over the unwieldy sheet of his beloved newspaper.

Clara obeyed. She had no desire for music, but she wished to please her father. She *must* please him in the future, if that catastrophe was to be averted.

She retired early, whispering to Percival, 'Do speak, say something, tell him that it must not be!'

Left alone with his father, Percival turned over in his mind how best to broach the difficult subject. To conceal from him that he knew his secret, did not enter his head; for Percival Osborne was entirely averse to mysteries.

'You mentioned that you went to Chapel Stacey,' he said at last, quite abruptly. 'I was there too, and I saw you.'

Lord Stretton cleared his throat.

'Indeed! I did not see you.'

'No, perhaps not, but we—I was walking with Miss Beddoes in the rectory wood, and I saw you with her mother.'

Lord Stretton likewise hated secrets. He was by nature open, and he would much have preferred saying straight out, 'Yes, of course, I'm going to marry her;' but he was not now his own master, and Lucy did not wish him to speak plain.

'Oh, yes, Mrs. Beddoes took me through the rectory wood. It's a pretty place, but the trees sadly want thinning. They are ruining each other. So you haven't given up the idea of Miss Sara. I thought you had promised——'

'Yes, but I met her by accident. I was not going to—to——'

'Well, I've told you plainly, Percival, her mother won't hear of it, so it's hardly fair to the girl to dangle after her, and

thus to prevent her from taking to some one else.'

'Her mother has no heart. She has no natural affection, and therefore she is a woman whom no good man can respect; besides——'

'Excuse me, Percival, but I cannot allow a lady who visits here to be spoken of in that way.'

'I am sorry to do it, but I must say so now that I know the true meaning of her refusal. I think a great deal less of her than I did before.'

'It is hardly your place to impute motives to any lady, especially one so much respected as Mrs. Beddoes happens to be.'

'I do not respect her. Why did she uselessly oppose our engagement? Why did she, and does she, sacrifice her daughter's happiness? Simply for her

own ends, and because she wishes to be mistress here.'

Percival had worked himself up to a state of anger which his father had never before witnessed, but he saw that concealment was now useless. By some means or other his son had found him out. Lord Stretton's manner was beautiful in its dignified simplicity as he rose and confronted his son.

'You are mistaken, Percival, whatever may be your ideas, your false ideas about the subject, let me assure you that it is I who wish Mrs. Beddoes to be mistress here; as you have chosen to acquaint yourself with my private affairs, I am very glad to tell you plainly that as soon as—it is consistent with my position I shall bring Mrs. Beddoes here as Lady Stretton.'

'I know it, I know it, but it is not too late yet. Will you not reconsider your

decision, sir? You will be doing Clara a great wrong, and besides you will spoil our family life.'

'I cannot see it in that light,' said Lord Stretton, though he knew only too well that, if his action was not wrong in itself, it would certainly entail great trouble on his children. Lucy certainly would bear no joint ownership of Stacey Hall. Still, with a mistaken notion of his duty, he gave the lie direct to his son's statement, and bore himself as *preux chevalier*. He had certainly reckoned without Lucy when he had told his conscience that by marrying her he would wipe away his past sins. It appeared now as if in doing this he would merely forge new chains for himself. He was in a very difficult position, but he was still valiant, still able to show a bold front.

'Because, father, you have not considered

the subject all round. Have you no duties towards us? Are we not your children? Consider what will be Clara's feelings when you bring a new mistress here; remember her strong affection for her own mother, and the bitterness you will bring into her life. Besides, have I no claim upon you? If you marry Mrs. Beddoes, it means that she will never consent to my marriage with her daughter, and we shall have to go against both of you. What will the world say of us? That may be of small importance to her, but it will be for no one's real happiness——'

'I see you ignore my wishes.'

'Do I? I don't think so; how can you be happy when your own children will have been estranged from you, and when the past, which must be sacred, is thrust out of your thoughts?'

'You are very eloquent, Percival, but

I assure you it is useless. I don't deny that Mrs. Beddoes refuses altogether to let her daughter marry my son. I have pleaded for you, but, after all, she is mistress over her own household, even though you fail to recognise that I am master here. As for the rest, if Clara will receive my wife as it is her duty to receive her, I see no reason——'

'It will be impossible——'

'Remember, Percival, that by marrying again I shall forfeit a large part of your mother's fortune, and that you and Clara will divide it. Does that look as if my motives were mercenary?'

'No, sir. I have never thought so; on the contrary, you have been the tool of a mercenary woman, whose highest ambition——'

'Percival, I cannot listen to such words.'

'Then to what will you listen, sir?

What can I do? If, for the present, I consent to waive all claims to seeing Sara, may I claim the same from you with regard to her mother?'

'You will have to give up Sara, and I shall certainly not make a bargain with my affections, whatever you may do.'

This remark raised Lord Stretton in his own estimation. Years ago, he had made a bargain, now he felt very noble for refusing any compromise.

'Then, will nothing move you? I have reason to know that you will repent, and in that case you will not be able to say that you were not warned. As your only son, I will have nothing to do with it. I will not let anyone imagine that I consent to her taking my mother's place. She has already turned you against your children and scattered their happiness to the winds, and what else she may do I should not

dare to guess. Have I not given up a good deal for your sake, just because I was your only son? and now, now——'

'Now, Percival, you can do one thing more: never let me hear you speak again like this of my future wife.'

Percival lost all power of true reasoning; the sacrifices he had made seemed so little appreciated, and his own happiness so little considered, that his anger rose. He could no longer control his feelings, and he stood up, pale, his voice trembling with barely-suppressed indignation.

'Then, sir, I wash my hands of the whole business. I would cut off my right hand rather than help this on. I will give up all idea, at present, of marrying Sara—not because you say I must, though I quite believe it, but because by marrying the daughter I should be countenancing your marriage with the mother. I will

write to Mrs. Beddoes this very evening.'

'As you please, Percival, it will make no difference to her; and now I think, for both our sakes, that we had better end this painful scene.'

Lord Stretton rose, and with grave dignity he walked out of the room. He would rather have served Lucy in any other way, but he had done it in this manner because of her expressed wishes.

'Percival need not have made this scene,' he thought; 'it was certainly very undutiful of him. He has always been such a good son, and now—now——' No, certainly marriage was a state of life not made easy for him; but, anyhow, he had been true to her, true to the future Lady Stretton!

CHAPTER XIII.

A WILL.

Sara came home feeling as if she were treading on air, and as if earth were heaven. Nothing mattered now that she had once more seen Percival. They would, of course, have to wait, and they must be patient, but true love never ran smoothly. There was nothing to mar their perfect love and their perfect understanding. When her mother had settled her own romance perhaps she would have time to attend to her child's love-story;

and Sara laughed as she happily decided the matter in this way. She ran quickly across the lawn for fear of meeting her mother, who might be saying last words to her lover! How very funny it was, and how very delightful! Perhaps—such a thing had happened—she and her mother would be married on the same day. Then an idea struck her. For some reason her mother wished this love-affair to be kept private; that was why she had not been very cordial to the Gwillians. Did her uncle know anything about it? How much she longed to ask him, but she must not do so.

The days fled quickly, and yet she had heard nothing about their home-coming. Herringham had not been near to her, but he sent her a note saying his people were going on to the English lakes. Sara

thought him a little unkind, but, on the other hand, how could he come to see her when he had been forbidden to do so? Dear old Herringham! he would like Percival when he knew him. At present all the Gwillians were prejudiced about Lord Stretton's family. The reason lay in land questions, and this feud had been carried on by past generations of Osbornes and Gwillians. How silly such quarrels were! but men seemed to enjoy them. They belonged to the sex, and were not easily eradicated. Such were Sara's meditations.

To-day, as she stood at the open window, too happy to do anything but dream of Percival, she saw her mother coming slowly out of the wood. She was alone, and as she stepped upon the lawn a white rabbit darted away almost from under her

feet. The rooks above were holding an evening parliament, and a red flush flooded the west. Sara watched her mother slowly approaching, and she noticed that a smile was still lingering on her lips. Evidently she was not aware of Sara's presence, or that anyone was watching her, for she looked down on the ground every now and then, gently flicking the taller grasses with the ivory tip of her sunshade. Sara was more than ever struck by her mother's grace. Her walk was queen-like, so the daughter expressed it to herself; there was poetry in her movement, and some new expression illuminated her face. The former look of sadness had disappeared. Sara liked the old expression best, she had associated it with her mother for so long that now she missed it, and it almost seemed to add to the unspoken estrangement between them.

'I remember somebody saying,' thought Sara, 'that the movement of a snake was the most graceful motion of created things. Mother seems rather to glide like that than to walk like an ordinary common person. She is happy now, I can see it, and so am I! If only we could exchange confidences.'

Sara laughed softly, and the slight noise made Mrs. Beddoes look up. She caught sight of the tall, well-made girl, with her beautiful auburn hair, and immediately the smile faded from her lips.

'Are you in, Sara? Did you give Mrs. Smith the frocks? I hope that she was grateful.'

'Extremely,' said Sara, her buoyant spirits feeling slightly chilled. Should she tell her mother everything? No, no, she could not. 'I had a beautiful walk. Has Mr. Profitt come yet, and did you enjoy your drive?'

'Mr. Profitt telegraphed that he had missed his train. He will be here by eight o'clock. I must write some letters before post-time.'

Mrs. Beddoes passed in, and as her soft black dress touched Sara's more prosaic print, the girl felt chilled. She took up a book, and walking slowly and thoughtfully upstairs to her pretty sitting-room, she looked out towards the distant hills lying far across the valley. It was all beautiful, and she had had a glorious time. She did not mean to have let any shadow fall upon her to-day, but it had crept in after her just when her mother's soft skirts touched her. She opened the book. It was full of manuscript extracts. Perhaps the rector's wife had copied this translation; anyhow, Sara felt it thrill through her. It was as if Percival were by her side, and as if he were speaking to her:

'Love, if to-morrow word came I must leave you,
Would this, our happy time, cheer you or grieve you?
Would you then wish that you never had known me,
That I had left you in peacefulness only?
Would you be desperate, Love, or sad only?
Love, if but once had the sun, in his brightness,
Poured on the world all the flood of its whiteness,
Never again should the darkness unbroken
Reign as of old, ere the fiat was spoken;
Day would have dawned, though but once,
—Take the token.'

'Yes,' she thought, 'that is true of love; if I were never to see him again I should still be glad, not sorry that I had seen him. He is so good, so true.'

She rose, and walked a little while up and down her room. She felt restless, and all the happiness which she had enjoyed came back to her; but she longed for more, she wished to feel free, free to love and to be loved, free to act and to work. It was since this money had come to her that she had become bound. It was

strange, that which she had welcomed as able to give her freedom was, in reality, that which had deprived her of it. This thought, however, seemed foolish, and she shook off her gloomy ideas and began dressing for dinner. Harriet as usual came to help her, but Sara now no longer heeded her, though she could not get over her dislike for her. When she was again left alone, she looked in the glass and smiled as she hummed softly,

'Enough! enough! it is enough for me, to dream of thee;' and then she laughed at her own sentimentality.

She heard Mr. Profitt's fly drive up, but she did not meet him till dinner-time, when she found him already in eager conversation with her mother. During dinner the stout lawyer with his thin treble voice was very amusing, full of talk and of neat compliments, and en-

tirely fascinated by Mrs. Beddoes' perfect womanhood. Sara's radiant stillness was lost upon him. He kept thinking to himself, 'The mother should have had the money. Some one is sure to fall in love with *her*; women like that are far more attractive to men than girls like Miss Beddoes. That money will, however, make up, in the eyes of many, for all her imperfections.'

'Will you come into my little sanctum, Mr. Profitt?' said Mrs. Beddoes, after dinner. 'We shall be quite undisturbed there.'

'Certainly, certainly,' he said, quickly. 'I shall want a few words with you presently, Miss Beddoes. You know that our friend Cobbin will be home well under the three months. By the beginning or the end of October we may expect him. He won't miss your coming of age, I

feel sure. He is quite devoted to his ward.'

'Indeed, I am equally devoted to him,' said Sara, laughing; and then she was left alone and sat down to play some dreamy music, her thoughts being far away with Percival.

In the sanctum there was a small fire burning brightly, for it was a chilly evening, and without it the room on the ground floor sometimes felt damp. The curtains were closed, and two arm-chairs drawn near the hearth looked most inviting. Never had Mr. Profitt seen Mrs. Beddoes look so beautiful and so animated. There was a flush on her cheek, and her white, blue-veined hands clasped on her knee denoted nervous energy, seen only in the hands of women possessing great strength of character allied to a highly developed nervous system.

'It is very good of you to spare us a night,' said Mrs. Beddoes. 'Are you quite comfortable? It is so much easier to explain and understand things in a quiet room than in a busy London office.'

'Pray don't apologize, Mrs. Beddoes, it is a pleasure to me, a great pleasure to come here. You know that I am entirely at your service.'

'Yes, I know that you are most kind. Money cannot procure a real friend such as you have proved yourself to be to us.'

Mr. Profitt at once ascended many stairs of the paradise of praise.

'You mustn't praise me, indeed you must not, Mrs. Beddoes. When I first saw you I recognized at once that I had to do with a very—forgive me for saying so—with a very superior woman, one who was an honour to the sex.'

'I am afraid that you were mistaken,' said the widow, raising her head and bestowing upon him a smile so captivating that he was filled with joy.

Mrs. Beddoes then rose and took a letter from the writing-table, saying, as she opened it,

'I quite agree about the necessity of making a will. It is of course a mere formality, but it might save trouble if Sara married before she was of age or—or if anything else happened.'

'Of course if she marries before she is of age—which I hope will not be the case, as it complicates legal business—Miss Beddoes would have to make a new will. Naturally she would like to leave her money to her husband as well as to provide for you, but in any case, as you say—in any case, suppose something happened, it is wiser, safer to——'

'Can she leave her prospective fortune?' asked Mrs. Beddoes, softly.

'Yes, certainly. You see it is hers at present, only it is under the power of others. We are, alas! all mortal, and Miss Beddoes might—I am speaking from a purely business-like point of view—she might die, say the day after she came of age, without having had time to make her will, or she might meet with a fatal accident the day before——'

'In that case, and without a will, her money would come to the next-of-kin?'

'Yes, that is to you, but it would be more business-like if she——'

'Yes, I quite understand. It would be better to be prepared for all contingencies.'

'Besides, I am sure she will wish to remember her relatives, the Gwillians, and in the case of her dying without a will it would be unpleasant for you to have to

settle all these things. It might create jealousies.'

'But if she makes a will leaving them all her money, would it be valid?'

'Certainly, but the case is not likely to arise. Miss Beddoes is, I see, devoted to her mother.'

Mrs. Beddoes said nothing, but she looked dreamily into the fire.

'I hate advising or meddling in such things,' she said at last. 'May I leave it entirely to you, Mr. Profitt?'

'Of course. Please don't for a moment think that I mean to hurt your feelings.'

Lucy looked up and smiled.

'No, you are the kindest of men! You will see Sara and settle everything; only, if by chance you found her inclined to do anything foolish—to leave her money in a foolish manner, I mean—you might inter-

fere as a friend. Placed as I am in a peculiar position, I don't want to have anything to do with it. I want you to be able to say that I did not influence her at all. Indeed, she does not even know why you have come.'

'Exactly, but you must not be sensitive about a will, my dear Mrs. Beddoes. We lawyers think nothing of it, and your daughter is in splendid health. Not a chance of her dying for years, but then we must act as if she were going to die to-morrow. The law is not sentimental.'

'The law is lodged in a very kind man,' said Lucy, holding out her hand. 'When you first saw me I was so lonely, I had nothing to cheer me, and now——' Lucy sighed, and hers was a sigh of relief. 'Now I feel very different, my life is fuller and happier.'

'Still happier in the future, I hope.'

'No, no,' said Lucy, quickly. 'But shall I send Sara to you now?'

'Thank you, but——'

Lucy rose.

'Let us finish this at once, and then we can enjoy your company.' She walked back to the drawing-room, and called out, 'Sara!'

Sara rose from the piano.

'Yes, mother?'

'Mr. Profitt wants you about a mere matter of business. When you have done, come back to me.'

Sara went. Her step was free, and there was a ring of happiness in her voice.

'Mother says that you want me, Mr. Profitt?'

'For a few moments, my dear young lady. A mere matter of detail, or rather,

a mere business form. A lady with your expectations must of necessity—of necessity, I say—make her will. Now I have drawn up a few details, to see if they will meet your wishes.'

'But I have no money yet,' said Sara. She wished at this moment that she had never heard of the gold-mine.

'Exactly so, but this does not prevent you from making a prospective will. Shall I draw it up as I should do it for any daughter under age? You know that you can alter it any day, but it is wiser to have something to show to legal eyes.'

Sara was silent a moment. She thought, 'If I died suddenly, mother would get my money, she would never want for anything, just as if I were alive, and perhaps she would think of me more lovingly. Percival would not care for money, I

am sure; he loves me, just me. It has brought me so little luck that I shall leave him something that he would really value, something of mine.' Aloud she answered,

'Of course, my mother must have it, except that I want to leave some money to my Uncle Gwillian, or to his children if he is not alive.'

'And the amount?'

'I know so little about money matters. I should like Uncle Gwillian to have enough to prevent him worrying over the price of corn,' said Sara, laughing.

'Exactly so, would you like to say five hundred a year? Of course, all this is a mere rough estimate. Your mother should be your heir, and you would like your Uncle Gwillian to have a sufficient income to assure him ease of mind?'

'Yes. How nicely you arrange it all. Thank you.'

'Not at all, not at all. Now don't let me keep you talking on such dry subjects.'

'It is as it should be,' he thought. 'The girl is very fond of her mother, who is certainly a charming woman, a very charming woman.'

CHAPTER XIV.

WITHOUT CAUSE.

Sara went to bed feeling happier than she had done since her first arrival at Chapel Stacey. She had seen Percival, and he had shown her that his love had not changed, and that, whatever might be the cause of their evil fortune, it had nothing personally to do with him. Nothing mattered if they were true to each other. No one could come between them. In Sara's mind love was something holy, something divine, something that raised her above everything sordid and mean. The passion

which so many have described did not form part of her love, rather it was something far more beautiful, made up of unselfishness and reverence. Love was, to her mind, the indissoluble union of two souls in a region where the world does not enter, and where love alone reigns and rules. Perhaps those who possess such natures cannot reach full maturity without sorrow, but joy seems to belong to them by right of the purity of their souls, and of the loveliness of their lives. Without possessing great talents they seem to beautify life, and to make one believe in a future when humanity without conscious abasement shall look upon things divine. To meet such characters is to feel that the days of miracles are not over, for those endowed with them can pass through life without being soiled by it. Evil does not seem to

come within the sphere of their understanding, but when they are forced to look upon it they are frightened and astonished. Characters like this, however, if obliged to come into such close contact with evil that it scorches them, will bear the pain unflinchingly, and will not cry out against the justice of God, or against the cruelty of Fate.

On this special morning the clouds were grey. There was a dreary feeling in every corner of the dreary house, but Sara sang as she dressed, and her voice, in its flexible sweetness, was like that of the rising lark. When she was ready to go downstairs, she looked for a moment into the looking-glass. It was certainly not vanity that made her do this, but a wish to see what it was that had first attracted and then had given her Percival's love.

'My red hair!' she thought, laughing. 'He calls it sunshine, but it's very reddish sunshine. I'm not really pretty, not nearly as pretty as my mother. How happy we shall be! He will plan nice ways of spending the money, and he will help me to carry out his ideas. If we two together can lessen the evil of the world, then life will be worth living.'

She went downstairs, and found her mother talking to Mr. Profitt. Both seemed in good spirits, and greeted Sara with smiles, but the girl's eyes even more quickly noted that there was a letter for her from Percival lying near her plate on the breakfast-table.

'I am not going to have prayers this morning,' said Mrs. Beddoes, 'as Mr. Profitt must catch the early train. Sara, will you pour out the coffee?'

Sara slipped her letter into her pocket, and obeyed. She too was very sweet and gracious, very full of fun, for she felt much more at her ease in the presence of a third person.

'It is a dull day. It will rain soon,' said Mrs. Beddoes.

She held a letter in her hand, and then, recollecting herself, she too put it into her pocket.

'The country is all very well for a sunny day in the height of summer, but give me London for nearly all the months of the year,' exclaimed Mr. Profitt.

'You won't allow that poetry dwells undisturbed in the country?'

'Poetry, my dear madam! Poetry—pray what is it? To me it's a good crowd elbowing itself down the Strand, and a fine supper after the theatre. As for finding poetry in a damp wood, it is past my

comprehension; though, of course, if I might make an exception, it would be when I saw Mrs. Beddoes walking in it. Women and men are my only poems, and not short lines all about moonshine.'

'There are several spheres even upon earth,' said Mrs. Beddoes, smiling. 'The poet has one to himself.'

'And I shan't knock at his door, I assure you. By the way, before I go, you will kindly give me your signature, Miss Beddoes, and then I shall not have to trouble you again.'

Sara did as she was asked, and when the cheerful lawyer had said good-bye she hurried upstairs to her sitting-room to read her letter. Mr. Sutton was soon coming, and she would have very little time in which to enjoy it.

Poor Sara did not yet realize that she had indeed only put off an evil day; she

read and re-read the letter, still standing by the window, without being at all able to understand it. Only she knew that all the sunshine was suddenly gone out of her life, and that darkness which could be felt was close to her. This was Percival's note:

'My poor Darling,

'This must be my last letter till all this dreadful time is over. Last night I had a very painful interview with my father. I can't explain the reason of it to you; don't think that I am to blame, or that I can help myself. God knows that I have tried to see clearly, but I can decide upon nothing except that, for a time, you and I must have nothing to do with each other. It is not my love that is lessened. You know that; but the opposition that has dogged us all the while

is as strong as ever. Sara, if I could say let us scatter every consideration to the winds, and only think of ourselves, then I would urge you to leave home and to let me guard and cherish you; but how can I? I feel bound to my father, and you, being under age, can hardly take a decided step against your mother's wishes. Fate is against us. Sara, my darling, how can I honourably say, "Be true to me," when I am quite at a loss to say when I can openly come forward to claim you? No, you must be free, quite free, and yet do not blame me, do not seek to know. I don't know even if I am right or wrong; I only know that I love you with all my heart, and that, for that very reason, I must not ask you to bind yourself to me.

'Good-bye, Sara, my dear, dear love! Don't think hard thoughts. Remember that

nothing can really prevent us loving each other, even if—— No, I will add nothing more, except that I am now and always

'Your devoted lover,

'PERCIVAL.'

Sara could not understand it: she could only realise one thing, and this was that Percival himself gave her up. He loved her, but he would not let her bind herself to him. That feeling had been her one consolation, her one hope, and that was taken from her. Should she answer the letter? She hardly knew what to do. She felt dazed, as if life had stopped still, and as if she was now indeed forsaken.

At this very moment Mr. Sutton was announced, and, before she turned away from the window to receive him, she saw her mother, wrapped in her long cloak, going through the gate into the wood.

'Ah!' she thought, 'mother does not have to suffer and to wait. Why must I? why? why?'

She received Mr. Sutton as graciously as usual. She could not talk and laugh, but she played better than ever.

'That's it, Miss Beddoes, that's it; you have got it to-day, only to-day,' cried the musician, when she had finished.

'What is *it*?' said Sara, mechanically.

'The soul, the soul of music; it is like—like all other arts, it comes through——'

'Through what?'

'Why should I not say it? At times it comes by nature, but usually it comes through pain.'

'Then it is a hard price to pay for it,' she answered, looking at her master; and the old man paused.

He saw that his words were arrows, and

that they had found their mark, and he took his leave in silence.

Then at last Sara was alone. She stood by the window and tried to realize it. Alone, quite alone. This was what wealth had brought her. Was the money cursed? What did it all mean? Who was her enemy? Had she ever hurt anyone by word or deed? It was not Percival's fault. It was something very strong and very powerful, something that could influence him more than love for her.

At this instant, as she stood there again, she saw her mother wrapped in her long black cloak, this time walking slowly back from the wood. It was raining a little; there was a gentle patter audible on the rose-leaves clinging close to the window, and the rose-petals, loosed by the friction, fell slowly to the ground. Sara started a step back from the window.

'It is mother,' she murmured, in a dull voice, 'it is mother. She—she——'

The words died on her lips, for she felt herself suddenly enveloped by a strange bright light of dazzling whiteness, then it turned red. Everything about her spun round as if the furniture had begun a hideous dance, and as if some hidden power was impelling her to join in it; she stretched out her arms, feeling for some support, something to help her to resist this strange influence, and then a black curtain was lowered before her, and she fell quite unconscious against the great arm-chair.

Whilst Sara's music-lesson was taking place, Lord Stretton, with Lucy beside him, was sitting in the summer-house. He was decidedly less cheerful than usual to-day, though not less tender and loving to Lucy. He had been much disconcerted

by Percival's discovery, and he was making a clear breast of it to his love.

'He saw you, darling. He told me so straight out. He was walking with Sara.'

Lucy blushed, she could not help it.

'He saw us! He had no business to be here. I thought they were both more honourable than—they seem to be.'

'Poor things! they are very much in love, you know, dear. I can sympathise.'

'Does Sara know you? Surely not.'

'I should think that Percival is certain not to have told her.'

'I am glad. It is better she should be quite ignorant of your name.'

'You think so?'

'Certainly.'

'But very soon she will find it out.'

Lucy was silent for a little while, and then she answered,

'Douglas dear, will you do something to please me?'

'To please you? Of course, darling. Isn't that my chief thought?'

She smiled up at him, one of those smiles that make a man lose his head, so magnetic is its power. It seemed to him that he had never felt all the strength of Lucy's sweet enchantment before, and that feeling it, it seemed to him that life was all bathed in a golden glow, because Lucy formed part of this existence.

'Well, I have been thinking, dear Douglas, that your children won't make life very pleasant for you now that they do know, and nothing—nothing is worth a family quarrel.'

'Nonsense, you are worth a dozen, sweetest.'

'No, no, indeed I am not;' and she laughed softly. 'Now that Percival sees that he must resign Sara, at least till she is of age, it will make it easier for me, but for you—— No, it will be harder for you, and I won't have you made miserable.'

'Think only of yourself, dear. A man always finds other outlets.'

'Yes, that is it, that is just it,' she said, thoughtfully. 'A man throws himself into politics, or interests himself in Boards of Guardians and sanitary laws, whilst we women are always reaching out for love. I shall never be one of those women who say that man and woman are equal. You are far superior.'

Lord Stretton did not wish to contradict this statement.

'You, anyhow, are a perfect woman, dearest. I shall never fear seeing you one of the talking sisterhood, though I

feel sure that your influence could be powerfully felt wherever you went.'

All this praise was sweet in Lucy's ears, but she could not receive it as she would have done in the old, old days. Now she was too wise to trust any compliment and too clever to believe that influence lasts for ever.

'Hush, Douglas,' she said, playfully. 'You haven't yet heard what I am proposing. I want you to give in to Percival.'

'Give in to him! Why should I? He wishes to separate us.'

'Does he?'

Lucy's lips were quickly pressed together, and a gleam like light on blue steel shone in her eyes.

'We must make excuses for him. You see he loves.'

Lucy laughed.

'A calf love!'

'I don't say that, but what were you saying? You wish to be the oil on troubled waters?'

'I want you to tell your son that you have decided to leave Stacey Hall for a time. We can no longer meet in perfect peace. He wishes to separate us, and he shall succeed.'

'What are you saying?'

For one moment Lord Stretton was alarmed, but Lucy's face reassured him, and he was secretly glad of this concession for his children's sake.

'Only for a time, a short time, dear. Sara comes of age in February. By that time I shall be free of a mother's special responsibility. After that——'

'You are always thinking of others.'

'It will be better for you, Douglas. Don't leave England, I couldn't bear that, go to the English lakes now, and in the

winter to Bournemouth. You can put it on Clara's health, and then in February you must come back to Stacey.'

'Come back to you, my sweet one.'

'You won't forget me, will you?'

She held up her beautiful oval face, and looked up towards him with a slightly troubled look in the depth of her eyes.

'Don't reproach me again,' was his answer.

'No, no, I won't, but I fear everything now. I can't believe in—in anything.'

'Nonsense! don't look on the gloomy side. To prove to you how much I love you, darling, I will do as you command, though it will be very, very hard to part from you. I don't know if I can bear it for so long. Indeed, you must give me leave to run down and see you sometimes. I can stay at the hotel here.'

'Perhaps. Yes, it will be better, and we

can write to each other. No one can prevent that.'

'No one; but, darling, you will be lonely, very lonely unless you mean to fill your house with company, and I shall object to that.'

'I shall have no one. As to being lonely—that malady has for years been chronic.'

'Don't say that.—But about going away, I think, dear, that you are right. It would be better. By degrees the children will get reconciled to the idea of you as Lady Stretton, and then——'

'We must be independent of them and of everybody.'

'Of course, why not? and if by chance my old cousin——'

'Don't talk of death,' said Lucy, rising, 'only of love. Oh, Douglas, say it again.'

'Do you really need it, my love? It is my creed now. I love you, darling, I love you, I love you.'

Lucy rested her head one moment on his shoulder. She heard the words, they were as sweet music to her mind, and yet, and yet, they did not make her heart beat faster and no warm blush of happiness came into her face.

'I must go, I must go now,' she said, with a little sigh. 'Settle it soon; this must be our last meeting till—till you can claim me before all the world.'

'That will be the happiest day of my life,' he said.

One more kiss upon her lips, one more loving look into her eyes, and then Lord Stretton tore himself away.

'Some women,' he thought, 'would have made a scene about Percival, but she is different to all women. She thinks of

what will be best for me. Oh, Lucy, my Lucy, what an ass I was years ago—but the pain is almost blotted out by this perfect time.'

Lucy did not look up at Sara's window as she crossed the lawn. Her head was bent, and she seemed plunged in deep thought. Her face was very pale, and her lips were pressed together. At the end of her deep meditation, and when her thoughts rose to the upper surface, she mentally remarked as if nothing had led up to the idea,

'The Gwillians will soon be back. I shall make advances and they will decline them. Then I shall be blameless.'

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

London: Printed by Duncan Macdonald, Blenheim House, W.

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